George Lucas's Monsters and Aliens, Volume 1:

Alien Exodus

Outline by Robert J. Sawyer

January 1995 · 11,000 words

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A note from Rob (2003) [*this note appears at the beginning of both the sample chapters and the outline.*]: In 1994, Ace Books — which had just finished publishing my Quintaglio Ascension trilogy — asked me to write a trilogy of novels outlining the origins of the races that make up the ***Star Wars*** universe.

At that time, Ace was still negotiating the details of a licensing agreement with Lucasfilm, and it looked like I'd be able to use the actual alien races that had appeared in the original trilogy of ***Star Wars*** films (*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*).

I had never been keen on doing work-for-hire media tie-ins, but my then-agent urged me to give this project a try. So I wrote a 10,000-word outline for the first novel, which I was going to call ***Alien Exodus***, and 11,000 words of sample chapters.

However, there were considerable delays in finalizing the details of the licensing agreement with Lucasfilm. By the time the book contracts were ready for my signature, it had been established that I couldn't use any of the actual races from ***Star Wars***, and so I bowed out of the project.

Ultimately, Ace brought in writer **Deborah Chester** to produce the books. Deborah, of course, started from scratch, and created her own trilogy with all new aliens; these books were published under the umbrella title ***Lucasfilm Alien Chronicles***.

Below is the outline for what I would have written; also available are the sample chapters I wrote.

No violation of Lucasfilm's copyright or trademarks is intended. I never signed a contract for this work, and was never paid for it, so I offer this material here as fan fiction.

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In addition to the films of George Lucas, I have used the following reference books in creating this outline:

- Carrau, Bob. *Monsters and Aliens from George Lucas*. Abrams.
- Slavicsek, Bill. *A Guide to the Star Wars Universe*. Del Rey.
- Denning, Troy. *Star Wars Galaxy Guide 4: Alien Races*. West End Games.

It is nighttime on the giant alien world of Forhilnor. **Cosmo Hender**, a human, is imprisoned in a large domed compound along with thousands of other humans, all clad in rags. Several **Gamorreans** — stout, piglike, green-skinned aliens with upturned tusks — march through the compound, armed with blaster rifles. A bed-check is being conducted: the exhausted humans are being inspected at the end of a day of slave labor.

Once the Gamorreans leave, and the compound is sealed, several humans help Cosmo escape through a secret tunnel that they have dug with their bare hands and drinking bowls. It's clear that the others look up to Cosmo as their leader — and leader material he is: handsome, youthful in appearance despite being at least middle-aged, strong, mentally agile, and charismatic.

Cosmo kisses his mate, brave, good-hearted **Sallee**, goodbye, and escapes into the night.

Once outside, we see that there are a total of nine domes spread out over a vast walled plain, cleared from a forest of gnarled alien trees. Cosmo catches sight of one or two other shadowy figures, also moving against the night. Beyond the domes is some sort of giant structure, obviously still under construction, only half visible in the darkness. Cosmo looks at it with disgust, but makes his way quickly to a hidden break in the wall surrounding the domes, where he slips out into the forest.

The sky is usually cloudy, but tonight, through a break in the clouds, Cosmo can see the Bloodstars, a small, densely packed globular cluster that is passing through this arm of the galaxy.

Soon others arrive — but they're not human. One representative from each dome has escaped for this latest secret meeting; such meetings are held only on the dark nights when Patroob, the largest of Forhilnor's three moons, is in its new phase. The represented races at the meeting, besides humanity, are **Bith**, **Ithorian**, **Kubaz**, **Ortolan**, **Kitonak**, **Twi'lek**, **Mon Calamari**, and **Sullust**.

Together, the individuals form the secret slave council, consisting of the leaders of each of the nine subjugated races — but Cosmo Hender is clearly the *de facto* head of the council.

Ridbrek, the wise, old Mon Calamari leader, complains that conditions for the slaves are worsening; his job is tending the herds of food animals that are used to feed the slaves — but the slave masters have cut the quality and quantity of grain available to his herds, meaning that the meat yielded is of inferior quality. Not only that, Ridbrek says he is getting too old for this — he finds himself more and more fatigued.

Jax Hobo, the Ortolan, says he, too, is fatigued, but he blames it on a recent cutback in food rations. No one pays much attention to this — Ortolans are obsessed with food [and Jax Hobo will provide Falstaffian comic relief throughout the novel].

Still, when **Taffee McMal**, the sturdy, stoic Kitonak, observes that he, too, is fatigued, there's no doubt — something is definitely wrong. **Munnin Munb**, the Sullust leader, turns to Cosmo: we have to get out, he says — we have to find a way to escape. Cosmo agrees. Sallee is pregnant with his child — he doesn't want his son or daughter to live a life of slavery. But they've all been enslaved for five generations — and none of them have any idea how they can escape, or even where they would escape to.

The meeting breaks up, and the slaves make their ways back to their domes. But on the way back, Hobo, the Ortolan, is confronted by a Gamorrean guard who has been out patrolling the area. The Gamorrean is about to shoot Hobo as a runaway slave, but Cosmo intervenes, and he and Hobo together kill the Gamorrean. They quickly hide the body, and hurry back to the slave compound.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Another place, another time. A world called Earth, in its early 25th century, is moving toward a totalitarian, computer-controlled society. An underground has been resisting this. Among its leaders are computer hacker **Dale Hender** [clearly a relative of Cosmo Hender, hero of the preceding chapter]; dashing and adventurous **Paxton Solo**; and his lover, the serious, tough-minded **Antonia Corelli**, pilot of the spaceship *Oort Raider*.

Dale uncovers plans by the computers that control this society to begin force-feeding drugs to the humans to reduce their passions. Not only that, but the computers will soon start taking away individuals' names and issuing them serial numbers. Indeed, Dale has cracked the computer bank containing the number assignments: his is to be the first of the THX series, THX 0001.

Dale has traced his own genealogy through computer records, going back five hundred years. He knows all about his ancestor Curtis Henderson, for instance [Henderson being the form of the family name before the practice of using nonsexist, non-patronymic naming was introduced in the 21st century]. But the new random serial-number system will destroy the ability to trace family ties, and take away much of their identity.

The underground is powerless to defeat the controlling computers, and so they plan to escape Earth aboard the *Oort Raider*. Earth doesn't yet have interstellar flight, but the *Oort Raider* is a giant ship, over ten kilometers long. Although huge, it is capable of landing on Earth — indeed, that's the whole point of its existence. Its four vast storage tanks are used to capture cometary nuclei from the Oort cloud at the outskirts of the solar system. These are then hauled back to Earth, where they are used for their water and other raw materials.

The underground is making secret modifications to one of the *Oort Raider*'s four storage tanks to turn it into a habitat capable of taking five thousand humans on a multi-generation mission to Alpha Centauri, where the latest space telescope pictures have identified an Earth-size planet in

an orbit they hope is appropriate to support life. There, they plan to create a new, free society — if, that is, they can escape from Earth ...

The next day, Cosmo is hard at work, along with a mixed human and Twi'lek crew, carving stone blocks in a quarry. The humans are working in silence — the masters don't allow work songs or conversation. But the Twi'leks are talking amongst themselves using intricate dances of their headtails. We see now the giant, half-built structure that was only glimpsed the night before. It is a vast stone temple, rising up a thousand meters into the sky.

Leego, the task master overseeing the slaves, is a Rodian — green skinned, with large, faceted eyes, a tapir-like snout, thick-stalked cup-ended antennae on his forehead, and long fingers ending in suction cups. He is a sadistic, cruel being, who delights in tormenting the slaves working beneath him. When he approaches Cosmo, Cosmo fears he's in for a beating — something Leego enjoys inflicting without necessarily having any provocation. But Cosmo is surprised when the Rodian simply tells Cosmo that he's wanted at the Governor's palace — in all his years of slavery, Cosmo has never once been inside the giant, opulent structure in which despotic Governor **Kaxa** and his family live.

A Gamorrean guard escorts Cosmo to the palace, and we see that the palace staff consists of about equal numbers of Gamorreans and Rodians — and we also see that there is no love lost between those two races; although they work together, serving the Governor, it's clear that Gamorreans and Rodians have an uneasy alliance at best.

Neither Gamorreans nor Rodians are the true master race; that role belongs to the **Varlians** — cold, calculating insectoid creatures, three times as large as a human. Cosmo is taken to see **Delba**, the sole daughter of Governor **Kaxa**.

Delba seems surprisingly gentle for a member of the master race. She tells Cosmo that she requires a new attendant on her staff, for she is soon to lay an egg. Leego has identified Cosmo as one of the strongest and brightest slaves. Henceforth, says Delba, Cosmo will no longer have to work in the quarries; he is now part of Delba's entourage, and will be quartered here at the palace. Cosmo is very upset — it will mean separation from his beloved Sallee. He protests that his wife is with child, but Delba dismisses his concerns; slaves have no choice in where they are assigned.

Reluctantly, as slaves have so many times before, he accepts what he cannot change. At least the work will be infinitely easier than carving stone all day — and, he suddenly realizes, access to the palace may be just the thing he needs to help the other slaves escape ...

Delba is having a party to celebrate her forthcoming egg-laying. She is surrounded by other Varlians, including her father, Governor Kaxa, who is cruel, mean-spirited, and power-mad.

Conversation amongst the Varlians turns to the topic of economics. Cosmo, who is serving drinks, momentarily forgets his place as servant, and chimes in with an opinion. Governor Kaxa is about to order him killed for insolence when one of the Governor's aides intervenes, observing that Cosmo's comment had, in fact, been quite clever and insightful. "We could use more slaves like him," the aide says. Kaxa relents, and the party continues, Cosmo having barely escaped with his life.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Plans are proceeding smoothly for the launch of the modified *Oort Raider*, but the controlling computers are becoming suspicious. The launch schedule has to be moved up. Five thousand members of the underground cram into the rude quarters that have been assembled in one of the giant comet-nucleus storage tanks. But the computers have discovered the escape plan, and a fierce laser battle ensues in the docking facility between members of the underground and police robots. It looks like the underground members will be captured, but some of them sacrifice themselves so that the rest can escape — and the giant *Oort Raider* rises up into the sky ...

When the party is over, and Cosmo is busy cleaning up the now-deserted room in which the party was held, Delba returns. She's very intrigued by what Cosmo had said earlier about economics, and engages him in conversation — the first time she's ever really spoken to him except to give orders. She's simultaneously amused and surprised by the facility of Cosmo's mind, and asks him if he's ever read the works of Balladda, a great Varlian thinker. Cosmo is surprised by the question. "Your highness," he says, "I can't read at all — no slave can."

Delba sees an opportunity here: she will soon have to begin teaching her own child to read. Why not practice her skills on Cosmo? Cosmo points out that it's illegal to teach a slave to read, but Delba counters that she is the Governor's daughter — she can do whatever she pleases. Besides, her Varlian friends are a bit thick — she'd welcome having someone clever around to discuss Balladda's writings with.

Delba begins teaching Cosmo to read. He picks it up with remarkable speed — he's quite bright, and the process is made easier by the fact that the Varlian alphabet is actually very simple — the letter forms match the shape of their insectile mandibles as they make different sounds. Delba enjoins him not to reveal his newfound skill to anyone else. Cosmo, feeling he has earned Delba's friendship, asks a favor: he reminds her that his mate, Sallee, will soon give birth. Could she, perhaps, be transferred to the palace staff, too?

But Delba dismisses the notion — she jokes that she doesn't want to share Cosmo with anyone. Cosmo realizes there is more than a grain of truth in that ...

Cosmo is in the palace when a commotion occurs. Three slave leaders — Jax Hobo the Ortolan, Ridbrek the Mon Calamari, and **Fob Discordia**, the sly and cunning Twi'lek leader — are brought before the Governor. A Gamorrean guard has been missing for some time now, and at last his body has been found by search parties. He'd been murdered, doubtless by a runaway slave. As punishment, says Kaxa, all slaves will have their workloads increased by ten percent. Fob protests that the slaves are already fatigued and at their limit of productivity, but Kaxa says that any slave that cannot meet the new quotas will be executed. Cosmo is enraged by this latest cruelty. He vows to find a way to free all the slaves ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* is diving well below the ecliptic in its journey out of the solar system, but robot mining ships from the asteroid belt, loyal to Earth's controlling computers, try to intercept it. There's a fierce space battle, in which the robot ships use mass drivers to hurtle asteroidal rock at the *Oort Raider*. The *Oort Raider* carries dozens of small auxiliary ships, and these leave the mothership and engage the robot miners in battle. Thanks to

them, and to Antonia's skill in piloting the mothership, the humans narrowly escape with only minor damage and casualties ...

Cosmo's lessons continue, and soon he is reading at a sophisticated level. It's time, says Delba, to try out Balladda's books. She sends Cosmo to the palace library; as her servant, he has the run of the palace. But when Cosmo arrives at the library, the librarian is gone — apparently out on an errand. Although Cosmo isn't supposed to let anyone know that he can read, he figures, what the heck, no one's here — he'll just wander into the stacks, find the book himself, and bring it to Delba.

But while searching for the Balladda book, he comes across something else — a book whose title is *The Human Exodus*. The title page says it's a new translation of an ancient human text into Varlian by the Varlian historian Nalltba. Cosmo is taken aback — a human text? As far as he knows, humans have never been able to read or write. He looks around — the library is still deserted. He slips the book into his bag, quickly finds the book by Balladda that Delba wanted, and leaves.

Delba has Cosmo read to him from Balladda's book, *The Divine Varlian Destiny*. It turns out to be a manifest-destiny tract about how the Varlians are entitled to subjugate all other lifeforms. Indeed, several hundred years ago, the Varlians were almost wiped out by a deadly plague called the Changa Bloodrot, characterized by purple and green splotching on the skin — the reason the divine one had visited it upon them was that the then-emperor of Varlia had failed to enslave the primitive Wookiee race when he'd had a chance. Cosmo, who had begun to feel some measure of affection for his mistress, is shocked to see that Delba fervently believes that what the book says is true — that the Varlians deserve to rule. He realizes to his despair that there's no way by rational argument that he'll ever convince Delba — or her father — otherwise.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* enters the Oort cloud, and tracks down three large comet nuclei. These are maneuvered into the three currently empty storage tanks. Comets are essentially dirty snowballs, consisting mostly of water polluted by carbon, hydrogen, oxygen, and nitrogen — they will provide all the water, the food-synthesis raw materials, and the reaction mass for the ship's fusion motors for the long journey to Alpha Centauri. True freedom is still years away, at the end of a long, arduous journey — but the men and women of the *Oort Raider* can already begin to taste it.

Cosmo sees more and more of the Varlian civilization — indeed, he has free run of the palace, except for one heavily guarded corridor, down which no one but the Emperor and two of his most trusted advisors are allowed to go. Cosmo finds himself feeling strangely energized whenever he's near this corridor.

Although slaves are much in evidence, performing personal services, Cosmo is surprised to see that the Varlians also enjoy a high level of technology. They have spaceflight, and many kinds of machines. He looks out a palace window at the humans struggling in the quarry. It makes no sense to him: the Varlians could build the temple much better and much faster using their machines. Why, he wonders, do they insist on having slaves do it?

Cosmo is alone in his tiny quarters. He has no nighttime lighting in his room, nor can he ask for any — what would an illiterate slave need with a lamp? But he sits near the window, and, by the light of Forhilnor's three moons, begins to struggle his way through the text of *The Human Exodus*. There are many unfamiliar words, but Cosmo manages to decipher it all — and is shocked to read the humans once before had escaped oppressors ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* leaves Earth's solar system, the first manned ship to do so. There's a shipboard celebration — they're farther out than any ship has ever gone before, and going fast enough that they can't possibly be caught.

Everyone is settling in for the long voyage to freedom, when an alarm sounds from the forward sensor array. Something is pulling the ship off course. Antonia and her crew struggle to control the ship, but nothing they try helps. Ahead, a cosmic whirlpool has appeared — all sorts of interstellar debris, falling into an object that might be a black hole. It looks like the ship and its valiant crew are doomed ...

Governor Kaxa comes to see Delba while Cosmo is with her. The Governor, of course, ignores the slave, and simply speaks to his daughter. She must leave tomorrow for the Varlian colony world of Daltharg; Kaxa has arranged for the son of the Governor of Daltharg to fertilize the egg Delba is carrying. Such an auspicious union will do much to consolidate Kaxa's power.

Delba does not want to go — she has no objection to the assigned fertilization; that's the Varlian way. But she hates to travel, and it will be a long voyage — although the Varlians do have hyperdrive, spacetime near Forhilnor is bent severely by the nearby Bloodstars; this vast sea of red suns makes for very slow passage.

Kaxa curses the existence of the Bloodstars, too — Forhilnor was used as a slave repository precisely because the globular cluster's presence made it inaccessible, and Kaxa had been assigned to this backwater of the galaxy because the Emperor feared his ambition. But Kaxa will show him ... one day *he* will be Emperor, and the alliance with Daltharg is crucial to that.

Cosmo, assuming he will be traveling with Delba, is excited by the prospect. Perhaps he will even be able to escape while offworld himself, and find allies to return to free the other slaves ...

Delba is packing for her trip; Cosmo, owning nothing, has nothing to pack, but assists her. He asks how long they will be gone from Forhilnor. Delba is sad. *She* will be gone for three months, but Cosmo won't be coming with her; her father feels she is too attached to Cosmo as is, and says the separation will do her good. She will be taking two Kubazi handmaidens instead. Cosmo is shocked, wondering what will become of himself while she is gone. Delba leaves for the spaceport. Kaxa wanders by his daughter's chambers, sees that Cosmo is still there, and orders him sent back to the quarries. A Gamorrean guard comes to take him back, forcing Cosmo to leave at once. But Cosmo can't allow himself to leave without his book. He dupes the Gamorrean into allowing him to return briefly to his quarters, and he hides the book in his clothing. The book has become an inspiration to him, and he knows it will be an inspiration to the other slaves, too.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* falls into the whirlpool. The giant ship goes on a wild roller-coaster ride as it becomes clear that they've encountered not a black hole but rather

an interstellar wormhole — a passageway between distant points in space. The ship sustains heavily casualties and damage during the passage, but then emerges out into what seems to be normal space. Normal, but not familiar — the sky is densely packed with blue and white stars, meaning they're likely inside a galaxy, rather than a globular cluster, but dominating the view is another nearby spiral galaxy. The conclusion is inescapable — they are no longer in the Milky Way. Nor are they in its near vicinity: the visible spiral galaxy matches the arm pattern of neither Andromeda nor the Milky Way.

Antonia orders a computerized search for radio signals. But almost at once Dale Hender reports a startling result. His radio equipment is designed, of course, to ignore the 21-centimeter wavelength, where the three-degree-Kelvin cosmic microwave background radiation is found. (The cosmic background radiation is the heat left over from the original Big Bang explosion. It has cooled over time to just three degrees above absolute zero.) But, as Dale explains to Antonia, the three-degree band is clear; instead, there's uniform background noise at *seven* degrees. There's only one possible explanation: they've been displaced not only in space, but in time, as well: the universe is billions of years younger, and so the microwave residue of the Big Bang explosion hasn't cooled as much. Antonia makes the announcement to the crew: it is now a long time ago, and they are in a galaxy far, far away ...

Leego, the Rodian task master, relishes having Cosmo back — but remarks that the human has grown soft during his stay at the palace. He says with sadistic glee that an extra half-shift each day will toughen Cosmo up, and so when the Twi'lek and human work crews retire for the day, and a group of nocturnal Sullust and Ithorian workers take their place, Cosmo must continue working, cursing the job even more now that he's seen that such slave labor isn't necessary, given the machines the Varlians have ...

Finally, exhausted after his work back in the quarry, Cosmo has a touching reunion with Sallee. In his absence, she has given birth to a son, but has held off naming him until she and Cosmo were together again. They agree the child's name will be Freedom, something they fervently hope he one day will have ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* was badly damaged coming through the wormhole. Repairs are made, and the crew begins arguing about whether they should risk heading back through the wormhole again.

On the one hand, they'd never intended to return to the oppressive Earth anyway, but on the other, they at least had suspected a habitable planet awaited them around Alpha Centauri. They may find nothing here at all.

Antonia decides that they will attempt another passage through the wormhole, and orders all the auxiliary ships, which have been out exploring, to return to the mothership. But suddenly the whirlpool begins to fragment. It is, apparently, a transient phenomenon. They can race toward it, and probably make it through before it collapses completely, but one of the auxiliary ships, the *Century Eagle*, piloted by Paxton Solo, has been exploring far from the *Oort Raider*. Antonia has to choose: either make a mad dash for the wormhole, possibly just barely squeaking through, or waiting for the return of the *Century Eagle*.

Paxton urges her to go, to save everyone, but at the last second, Antonia aborts the maneuver,

unable to strand her lover alone in a strange galaxy. The wormhole collapses. They are now here for good.

A terrible accident occurs in the quarry. Munnin Munb, the Sullust member of the secret slave council, is killed. All the Sullust slaves stop working — under Sullust religious law, five days of mourning must be observed for the death of a leader. The slave masters threaten to kill the Sullusts if they do not return to work, but they insist: in their culture, one who strives for power is damned, and a leader is consigned to the Sullust version of hell unless his subjects pray for him upon death. It's the power of their positive thoughts that lift him from hell to heaven. Munnin Munb had been kind and well-liked, and the slaves will not abandon him.

Leego is prepared to open fire on the Sullusts, to kill all those who won't return to work. But Cosmo intervenes. He insists that the Sullusts be allowed their religious observance. Leego is about to gun down Cosmo, but a Gamorrean stops him — Munnin Munb may have been leader of the Sullusts, but Cosmo is *de facto* leader of all the slaves. Kill him, and there will doubtless be an uprising.

Leego is unwilling to decide Cosmo's fate himself. He drags Cosmo in shackles off to see the Governor.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Several small auxiliary craft are sent out to do parallax studies, to try to identify nearby stars. It turns out there is a yellow dwarf G-class star less than half a light-year away. The wormhole may have turned out to be a blessing in disguise: their journey to a new world may have now been cut considerably in length. (Indeed, the astrophysicists among the crew suggest that wormholes can only appear between points deep in a gravity well — in other words, it's not coincidence that they came out close to a star; they had to — just as the wormhole that had temporarily appeared on the outskirts of Sol system had had to appear at such a location.) The ship starts in toward the yellow star. Anticipation is high — but it quickly turns to concern when radio signals are detected. Someone — or something — is already there ...

Cosmo, emboldened by what he has been reading about human ingenuity and the desire for freedom, tells Governor Kaxa that a society built on slaves cannot endure. Eventually, the slaves will rise up. To avoid that, he must free the slaves — after all, he doesn't need them, anyway.

The Governor laughs at this notion — the workers of Forhilnor have been enslaved for centuries. They know no other life. Cosmo insists that he should let them go. Some of the Governor's aids urge Kaxa to kill Cosmo at once, but others advise that Cosmo will become a martyr if that happens. He should be left alive, they say, but his spirit must be broken.

The Governor considers. He will allow the Sullust slaves their five days of mourning. But Cosmo will be caged for those same five days, without food and with only minimal water, kept on public display outside the palace. Disobedience will be seen to not be tolerated.

Ugerat, a Kubaz, is the slave community's resident shady character, ingratiating, conniving, and able to procure things others cannot. Still, she is loyal to Cosmo, whom she sees as her best chance of escape. Her diet, like that of all Kubazi, consists of insects, and every night, she drives

swarms of glocka beetles into Cosmo's cage — beetles that are almost pure protein. Cosmo surreptitiously dines on these ...

Fob Discordia, the cunning Twi'lek slave leader, arranges to do work outside the palace. Although he can't speak to Cosmo, during Cosmo's long shifts with the human/Twi'lek quarry crew, Cosmo has learned to read Twi'lek headtail-dancing — the intricate pattern of movements of the two Twi'lek headtails that can be used to communicate without words.

Mon Calamari, meanwhile, have keen, almost telescopic vision when working in the air (a side-effect of them having eyes that can deal with multiple refractive indices, being also capable of working under water). Ridbrek, working across the square, watches the movements of Cosmo's fingers — Cosmo can, after a fashion, imitate Twi'lek tail-dancing with hand sign language.

Ortolans, meanwhile, can generate subsonic sound by vibrating their elephantine trunks — they are capable of talking amongst themselves over great distances without appearing to talk at all. Ridbrek relays what Cosmo is saying to Jax Hobo, and Hobo and the other Ortolans pass on Cosmo's instructions to the rest of the slave population. Even apparently isolated in a cage, Cosmo is coordinating a complex plan ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* is rapidly approaching the alien star system — and it soon becomes apparent that the radio signals aren't coming from any of the system's planets, but rather from a fleet of spaceships approaching the system from the other side. There is one planet in the star system's habitation zone — close enough that it will have a surface temperature above the freezing point of water, but not so close as to be too hot for life. In the ship's telescopes, it's seen to have a very high albedo — meaning it likely has clouds and oceans. But there's no artificial radio noise at all coming from it. The crew realizes that they and whoever is approaching from the other side may have stumbled on the planet at the same time. The humans, of course, are willing to share — there are only five thousand people aboard the *Oort Raider*, after all. But what will the intentions of the approaching aliens be?

At the end of his five days of confinement, Cosmo is brought before Governor Kaxa, who expects to see a broken man. Instead, Cosmo is healthy, and apparently undiminished in strength. Cosmo warns the Governor: The spirit of the slaves is stronger than he thinks. Let them go!

The Governor, although less cocky than the first time, again ridicules this suggestion. The nine races will always be slaves. Cosmo is told to return to his normal work in the quarry — work that he will do until the day he dies, says the Governor.

Cosmo again entreats mercy for the slaves. They are being worked too hard, he says — many are abnormally fatigued. Indeed, he says, although they've been keeping it a secret, many have died recently. There seems to be a disease spreading through the slave quarters. The slaves have been burying their dead in secret — since the disease infects across species boundaries, they feared the masters might try to stop the plague by killing those who had contact with ones who had succumbed to it. In fact, he says, Munnin Munb died of this very illness — the accident in the quarry was faked, to hide the true cause of his death, and it's only because he was the Sullust leader that his body, too, hadn't been buried in secret.

Governor Kaxa orders the body of Munnin Munb exhumed. There are purple and green splotches

on it. The Varlian doctor who exhumed the body is terrified. The marks are just like those of the Changa Bloodrot, the plague that devastated the Varlians on their home world centuries before.

The doctor makes his report to the palace by radio, and immediately quarantines himself. Precautions must be taken to ensure that no Varlian comes in contact with the plague — it will infect any species whose DNA codes for the blood protein fibrinogen — including all the slave species, the Varlians, and the Gamorreans. Only Rodians are immune — Rodia is unique in the galaxy in having intelligent lifeforms based on RNA rather than DNA. Kaxa is furious: he would have soon launched his plan to seize the Emperorship, but now everything is threatened by the plague. He needs the slaves alive for his plan. He gives orders to put his plan into effect early. If the slaves are dying off, he must act at once.

An earthquake occurs. The temple, still under construction, tumbles to the ground. There is destruction and death everywhere, but Cosmo heroically saves several other slaves, and even one Gamorrean, who was pinned by a large piece of rubble.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The *Oort Raider* reaches the new world first. It's everything the humans could have hoped for: a land-water world, with an atmosphere they can breathe, covered with vegetation, many types of animal life, but no indigenous intelligent life. Indeed, it seems a tropical paradise, a second Eden — absolutely beautiful and unspoiled.

There's no way the *Oort Raider* could make another interstellar journey, and the humans want very much to stay here. Antonia lands the giant ship on the planet.

But three other large ships arrive, landing in a small valley a few kilometers from where the *Oort Raider* has put down. A land speeder brings a crew from the alien ships to meet the humans, providing their first contact with other intelligent beings. The reader recognizes the aliens as Rodians — and they are carrying what appear to be formidable sidearms.

With them is one member of another race, a thin biped with a huge cranium, large, black, lidless eyes, and folds of skin covering the lower part of the face — a Bith. It becomes clear that the large-headed creature is a linguist. It has a phenomenal vocal range, an apparently perfect memory, and a vast intelligence. In short order, it learns English from Antonia, Dale, Paxton, and the others, simply by having them point at objects and say their names, or perform actions and say the verb associated with those actions.

The Bith tells the humans that his personal name is **Laximas**. Everything is going fine — first contact seems peaceful enough, and, although the humans can't talk directly to the Rodians, at least the Bith interpreter seems quite friendly, although the Rodians do seem to treat the Bith rather callously.

To the humans' amazement, Laximas explains that the Rodian ships had been traveling in hyperspace — a technology far beyond what the humans have — when they detected the presence of the transient wormhole. Such wormholes can wreak havoc on hyperspace travel, and so they'd dropped down into normal space. Apparently, they are carrying some sort of valuable cargo, and wanted to take no chances with it. Once in normal space, they'd detected the *Oort Raider* by its fusion exhaust, and had decided to have a look at it.

Antonia is pleased by their good fortune at meeting friends so soon, but Paxton and Dale are

suspicious. Something about the Rodians' behavior is very ominous ...

To Cosmo's surprise, the masters do not seem upset that the great temple has been destroyed; they're only sad about other, more practical buildings that have been damaged. Leego orders that the slaves start again building the temple, but he takes a number of slaves, and orders them to work on the rebuilding of the damaged buildings — including the library. Only slaves unaffected by the Changa Bloodrot plague can be allowed to work that close to the palace, so Cosmo is amongst those selected.

Leego has a secret meeting with the other Rodian guards. Although they are better off than the slaves, they are still under the command of the Varlians, and they have to share what wealth the Varlians dispense with the disgusting Gamorreans. Perhaps this plague isn't such a bad thing after all, he says, if it will eliminate the Varlians and leave the Rodians as rulers ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: After nightfall, Paxton and Dale make their way under cover of darkness to the Rodian landing site — and are shocked by what they see. One of the landers has its cargo bay open, and inside are hundreds of Biths, crammed into filthy living conditions. The Rodians are slavers, and their "valuable cargo" is a load of Biths. As the two humans watch, one of the Biths tries to escape, and a Rodian gives chase. The Bith is no match for the Rodian's tracking skill, and although Paxton tries to create a diversion without giving his presence away, the Rodian hunts down and kills the Bith.

The moon Patroob is in its new phase again; it is time for another meeting of the secret slave council. Cosmo slips out to attend it. As usual, the sky is mostly overcast, but Cosmo observes that the Bloodstars seem to cover a smaller amount of sky than he'd remembered.

At the meeting, Jax Hobo, the Ortolan, is quite agitated — the stars are out of alignment, he says, portending very dangerous times ahead. Cosmo dismisses this as just renowned Ortolan superstition ...

Cosmo realizes that knowledge is the key to the slaves' salvation. He secretly beings to teach the Bith slaves, including one named **Galarax**, to read. With their huge brains and flawless memories, it takes but a single lesson to teach anything to a Bith — and they, in turn, will go out and teach the members of other races.

Leego the Rodian goes to the library, and finds the old records related to the Changa Bloodrot. He has a plan that will lead to the downfall of the Varlians ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Paxton and Dale return to the clearing. The other Biths are being forced into arduous physical tasks, and the ones that fail are being shot. Paxton spots Laximas, the translator, amongst a group waiting to be tested. He makes his way through the dense foliage until he is close to Laximas. He manages get his attention, although Laximas seems quite myopic, unable to make him out until he is very close; he later explains that Biths have microscopic vision, but this skill is at the cost of not being able to see distant objects clearly. The Bith speaks to Paxton in low tones: the Rodians intend to take the humans as slaves — there's a

high-price market for exotic slaves. They've got a load of 15,000 Biths in captivity, but are going to weed it down by a third, to make room for taking the 5,000 human captives — the Rodians figure an exotic human slave might fetch a price ten times what a common Bith gets.

Paxton tries to create a diversion to help Laximas escape with them. In so doing, he opens one of the other Rodian cargo holds — and is shocked to find a giant, two-headed dragonlike creature within. It is also part of the Rodian cargo, a rare monster collected from very distant lands to be sold to the highest bidder.

Paxton, Dale, and Laximas escape into the forest.

An earthquake aftershock occurs — and this time, it's the Palace Nursery that's in danger. The Gamorrean in charge of rebuilding the library grabs Cosmo, the Kubaz named Ugerat, two Biths, and five super-strong Kitonaks, and takes them to the nursery. They have to evacuate the young Varlians before the whole building collapses.

Like many insectoids, Varlians have a larval stage. In this stage, they are sluglike beings larger than a human, with two small arms; giant mouths slitting their massive heads, and huge golden eyes. The reader is shocked to recognize the description: larval Varlians are much like the creatures they know as **Hutts**. Cosmo and the others help evacuate several larvae and several more Varlians in a cocoon state. Once they have gotten the young to safety, Cosmo watches in wonder as a metamorphosed adult emerges in fully insectile Varlian form from a cocoon.

Ugerat, the sly Kubaz, is an expert in insectoid lifeforms; after all, her entire diet consists of bugs. And Ridbrek, the Mon Calamari, is well-versed in genetics and selective breeding; he is responsible for tending the herds of animals used to feed the slaves. And Galarax, like all Biths, has eyes capable of seeing at a microscopic level. Although Cosmo's secret plan is working, they figure it's better to have two separate thrusts at gaining freedom. Together, the three of them come up with an idea ... but they'll need more information to carry it out.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: While heading back toward the *Oort Raider*, Paxton, Dale, and Laximas are attacked by the escaped two-headed dragon. Paxton is almost killed, but knowing he has to get back to warn the others gives him the strength to defeat the beast ...

Leego meets with **Gondo**, a mad-scientist-type Rodian chemist. The book on the Changa Bloodrot plague is frustrating. It's an old, damaged volume, and predates any notions of chemistry, so there's no information on the actual plague micro-organism. But it's clear that blood plasma carries it — and that contact with the blood of a victim causes almost instant death ...

Cosmo returns to the rebuilding of the library. The aftershock has damaged it even more. Cosmo almost breaks down and weeps at the sight of so many ruined books, so much lost knowledge. He begins sorting through the volumes that are now lying in a heap on the floor.

A piece of the ceiling begins to cave in — it's going to crush Cosmo's Ortolan friend, Jax Hobo. Too far away to intervene, he shouts a warning to Hobo, who looks up and sees the ceiling coming down. But, as the roof collapses, something remarkable happens: the pieces of debris deflect away from Hobo. The terrified Ortolan ends up standing, untouched, surrounded by a ring of

rubble ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Paxton, Dale, and the Bith translator Laximas quickly brief Antonia Corelli and the rest of the humans. They've got only a few options, the best of which seems to be to try to strand or kill the Rodians, free the Biths, and escape with them in the Rodians' fleet of faster-than-light craft. But they only have a matter of hours to prepare. The Rodians are heavily armed and technologically superior. Still, Dale estimates there are only a few hundred of them, and if the tide could be turned, and the Biths would join the fight, they might easily be defeated by the combined total of almost 20,000 humans and Biths.

Governor Kaxa is furious. He confronts his advisors — they'd promised him infinite power; how will he be able to attack the Emperor if Forhilnor is reduced to asteroids? They protest that the earthquakes are Kaxa's fault — he'd demanded they begin enacting his plan early than scheduled, and some settling-in difficulties have to be expected ...

Still in the library, Cosmo is amazed by what happened with the collapsing roof. Although he's ashamed to admit it, Cosmo had closed his eyes when the roof had started to collapse. But still he could see, he says, exactly what was happening, and he could feel each piece of rubble, as if he were touching it with ethereal fingers ...

Hobo hears something — another Ortolan calling to him subsonically, passing on a message from Ugerat. They need books on a particular topic ...

The next day, at a meal break, Cosmo manages to slip over to a Kubaz feeding group. Leego, the Rodian taskmaster, is amused by this, and tells Cosmo if it's bugs he wants to eat, then bugs he'll have. Leego smashes Cosmo's food bowl, and forces him to dig in to the disgusting Kubaz fare. But the meeting has served its purpose: Cosmo has succeed in smuggling a special book to Ugerat, a book with two intertwined spirals on its cover ...

A palace messenger arrives. Delba has returned to Forhilnor, and is asking for Cosmo. She's furious that he'd been sent back to the quarries in her absence. The messenger taunts Leego that he will feel Delba's wrath for mistreating her pet ...

Cosmo gets a final moment with Sallee and baby Freedom before he is dragged off once again to the palace. Just before he leaves, he gives Sallee instructions to pass on to the Kitonak leader, Taffee McMal ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Although the human technology is inferior to that of the Rodians, the *Oort Raider* has one thing the Rodians do not: three giant cargo holds containing the nuclei of captured comets. When out in space, the nuclei had been frozen solid — giant, dirty snowballs. But since landing the ship on this temperate world, the nuclei have melted, filling the holds with cubic kilometers full of dirty water, and that gives the Bith named Laximas an idea ...

The *Oort Raider* does a low-level flight over the low small valley in which the three Rodian ships have landed, and it opens its massive cargo holds, dumping the cometary meltwater into the valley, flooding it. Laximas had revealed that Clak'dor VII, the Bith homeworld, has many oceans, but Rodia is a jungle world where rain evaporates as soon as it hits the ground, meaning there are

no open bodies of water. So, Biths are accomplished swimmers, but Rodians are unable to swim at all. The slavers are drowned in the cubic kilometers of cometary water, while the thousands of Biths swim to the surface, then to shore, and freedom.

But one Rodian gets away — he uses his blaster to kill a half-dozen Biths, then lashes their bodies together, forming an escape raft. Antonia chases after him, but he manages to send a radio signal before he is captured ...

Cosmo is reunited with Delba. She had laid her egg on the Daltharg colony, and it hatched there. She is now accompanied by her son **Gelleda**, a baby Varlian larva, already a meter long and growing rapidly.

Delba seems genuinely upset at how Cosmo was treated while she was gone. Things will be different from now on, she promises. Her father has begun to enact his plan to seize control of the Varlian Empire, and soon they will have unlimited wealth.

Ugerat, Ridbrek, and Galarax have completed their secret work, using the information they have found in the book Cosmo smuggled to them. A sealed glass vial is prepared ...

While Delba sleeps, Cosmo slips away. Human slaves are a common sight in the palace, and no one pays him any attention, since he is walking purposefully, as if in the process of running an errand. He meets up with Taffee McMal, the Kitonak, who is also in the palace apparently on business. Taffee has brought with him a small stunner — stolen ages ago, with only five shots left in it, used by the slaves only when absolutely necessary. They make their way down the palace's one forbidden corridor, using up three of the five remaining stunner shots to subdue guards. They place a jug of Gamorrean wine next to each of the prone bodies.

Whatever, the Governor is up to, the secret must lie behind that door, and perhaps it can be used to help the slaves gain their freedom. Cosmo and Taffee make it to the end of the corridor and pass through into the secret chamber ...

Inside is a massive blue crystal, measuring a meter across — and, floating above it, levitating in the air, is the Governor Kaxa himself. He seems to be enjoying himself immensely. Cosmo and Taffee remain hidden behind some curtains, but, to his surprise, Cosmo finds himself rising into the air ...

Suddenly one of the Governor's aides enters, furious. He's found the Gamorrean guards apparently passed out from drinking in the corridor, leaving the crystal room unguarded. Kaxa's mind is on other things, though: how long till they arrive back at the Varlian empire?

Cosmo thinks he must be mishearing — arrive back? But he picks up from the conversation the horrible truth about what's been going on. The building of the temple was just a make-work project to occupy the minds of the millions of slaves on Forhilnor. Kaxa's aides have discovered the existence of some sort of hitherto unknown *Force*, innate to living matter — and this giant crystal acts as a lens for that Force, channeling it in a single direction. Kaxa is using the Force harvested from the millions of slaves to actually move Forhilnor and its sun out of the dead region of the Bloodstars and into the mainstream of Varlian space, where, with millions of slaves as his soldiers, he will storm the imperial palace and make Forhilnor capital of the Varlian empire. The

earthquakes were caused by the planet's inertia as it resisted being moved through space.

Cosmo seems to have a native ability to tap into this Force. Being close to the crystal, which has stored a huge supply of it, he manages with great mental effort to levitate Taffee. The two of them silently rise up, escaping in the nick of time through the chamber's ceiling ventilation ducts.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: With its initial fuel supplies gone and its cometary tanks empty, the *Oort Raider* can't take off again until the tanks are refilled with water from this beautiful world's oceans. Work begins on that. But now that the transient wormhole is gone, starships can exit hyperdrive directly inside this star system, and suddenly a giant warship appears orbiting above the planet. A shuttle comes down from it, disgorging large green piglike aliens with upturned tusks. The Bith translator recognizes them at once — Gamorreans, sometime enemies of the Rodians, but currently their trading allies. This time, hopelessly outnumbered and outgunned, all the humans and the Biths are taken prisoner.

At Cosmo's request, the Ortolans use their ability to call to each other subsonically to summon an emergency meeting of the secret slave council ...

Cosmo and Ridbrek tell the other slave leaders what they've discovered about the Force, and explain that the fatigue the slaves have been feeling has been caused by having their Force drained from them by the mysterious crystal.

The others slave leaders are dubious — they, and generations before them, have worked so long on the temple, they are having difficulty accepting that it was a meaningless make-work project. Even though they hated every moment spent in its original construction (and are hating the time being spent on its current post-quake repairs), they wanted to know that it would stand for a thousand centuries, that people in millennia to come would look upon it and marvel — and know that, once upon a time, there had been beings who had built it, that in some small way they would be remembered.

But Cosmo demonstrates the truth of what he's been saying. He closes his eyes and concentrates so hard that sweat flows from every pore. At first nothing happens, and Ridbrek and Hobo turn to go, but then slowly, very slowly, Cosmo rises into the air, levitating high off the ground.

"I didn't do this on my own," he says. "I did it by tapping into this Force I've told you about." With proper mind-training, he believes any living being can tap into the Force — and all of them, all the millions of slaves, must learn to do that, if they are to be free. Taffee confers on Cosmo the nickname "Skywalker" for his ability to levitate ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: In short order, more Rodian ships arrive. An argument ensues amongst the Gamorreans and the Rodians. The former claim half the slaves as fee for rescuing the lost cargo. The Rodians offer a bulk payment of just 500 Biths and 100 of the exotic new humans as payment. It looks as though in-fighting between the two slaver races may escalate enough that the humans and Biths might be able to escape ...

Nighttime. Ugerat, who, like all members of the Kubaz race, has excellent night vision, escapes the slave compound through the secret tunnel, and makes her way toward the reservoir that stores the palace's water supply. She empties the vial into the water, and slips back into the Kubaz slave

dome.

Delba has come to the communal nursery. It is the three hundredth day of her son Gelleda's larval state — the day on which he should spin his cocoon and begin his metamorphosis. Because he is destined to become an important Varlian leader, the event is shrouded in ceremony and ritual. But the day passes without the slightest sign of the larval child beginning to secrete a cocoon casing ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The Gamorreans and the Rodians come to an agreement on dividing up the slaves. The Rodians can keep three-quarters of all the Biths, but the Gamorreans get the remaining quarter, plus half the humans. The humans are divided into two groups — with Paxton Solo being put in one, and Antonia Corelli into another. They plead, through Laximas, that they are mated, and shouldn't be separated, but the Gamorrean slavemaster laughs — slaves don't get to choose their own mates. Get used to it, says the Gamorrean: for humans, freedom is a thing of the past.

It is now several days past when Gelleda should have begun cocooning. Delba demands that a Varlian doctor examine him. The doctor says Gelleda has failed to develop the cocooning apparatus. Delba is devastated.

Leego and the other Rodians raid the slave compounds, exhuming and confiscating the bodies of deceased slaves. They are taken to Gondo, who prepares spray guns filled with blood plasma extracted from the corpses.

Two more Hutt-like Varlian larvae are due to enter the cocoon state today, but both of them fail to begin the metamorphosis. And Gelleda is growing bigger; he is now weeks past the point at which his larval stage should have ended, and so is larger now than any larva anyone has ever seen before, a slathering monstrous being, five meters long ...

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: Isolated from the second group of humans, Antonia and those with her organize a daring plan to try to seize the Gamorrean shuttle. They undertake it, but it looks like all is lost — until Paxton and some of the humans from the other group appear. They'd come up independently with a similar plan to seize the shuttle. They make it aboard, along with some of the Biths, including Laximas, who knows how to fly the ship. They take off — but the Gamorreans radio after them that they will kill the remaining humans and Biths unless they return. Antonia figures they are bluffing — why kill thousands of valuable slaves to regain only a few hundred?

But the Gamorreans and Rodians do start executing the slaves, a hundred at a time. Laximas admits that it's him they are after: having been used in many negotiations, he knows valuable secrets, including a plot by the Rodians to betray the Gamorreans at an upcoming trading session. The Rodian slavers will indeed kill all the others just to get Laximas back.

Antonia returns the ship to the ground and surrenders. The Rodian leader is about to execute Laximas so that he can never be a threat again, but Paxton and Antonia intervene — and Antonia takes a blaster shot intended for the Bith. She lays dying in Paxton's arms. He promises her that

she'll always be remembered.

While the slaver ships are being readied for launch, Dale and Paxton bury Antonia — the one human who will remain behind on the beautiful planet.

The Varlians now realize that there is indeed a plague upon not just their slaves, but on the Varlians themselves. None of their offspring are entering the cocoon stage — and since it's only after metamorphosis that Varlians are capable of reproduction, it begins to look like this will be their final generation. Perhaps the Changa Bloodrot has mutated, and is causing this new effect. Kaxa and his aides debate whether to summon help from the Varlian homeworld. His aides tell him not to do that — if the plague is contagious, it might spread throughout their entire species everywhere in the galaxy. But Kaxa orders a call be made to the homeworld.

Ugerat, Ridbrek, and Galarax are perplexed. They had designed their serum to prevent Varlian larvae from entering the cocoon state, and had assumed the larvae would simply die once they had failed to do so. They hadn't anticipated them simply continuing to grow, and they now admit to the other slave leaders that they have no idea how long each larva might live — it could be centuries, or even tens of centuries. And, although they can never reproduce naturally, since they will never enter the adult state, they might be able to continue on through cloning themselves ...

Cosmo is disgusted. The adult Varlians were bad enough, but these giant larvae are even worse — being cruel and greedy, as only children can be.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The slaves are rounded up and apportioned again between the Gamorreans and the Rodians. They are ready for departure; all that remains is for the Bith translator to be executed. But suddenly another starship arrives in orbit around the planet. This one is of an unknown design, but is clearly superior to both the Rodian and Gamorrean forces. Laximas is left alive, in case his translation services are needed. A crew shuttles down from this new ship. The creatures aboard are giant insectoids — this is the first contact with the Varlians.

Laximas establishes that the Varlians, too, had detected the transient wormhole by its hyperspace signature, and had come from their very distant home sector to investigate. By the time they got here, the wormhole was gone, but their scanners showed life on this planet, which the Varlians now summarily claim for the Varlian Empire. They announce that Varlians will now be moving into this part of the galaxy, taking it over.

Cosmo demands an audience in front of the Emperor. Kaxa, devastated by what is happening to his people, grants it. Let the slaves go, Cosmo demands. The plague is raging amongst them — Cosmo removes his tunic and shows that he himself now has the telltale purple and green splotches on his arms and chest. The Emperor, terrified of further infection, relents at last — there already is a fleet of ships ready for his attack on the Emperor's homeworld — enough to carry all the slaves away. Take them, he says — take them and get out!

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The Gamorreans and the Rodians, realizing that they are no match for the superior Varlian technology, make a shrewd decision. They give all 20,000 Bith and human slaves to the Varlians, as an act of tribute, and ally themselves with the insectoids, promising to help them subjugate all other races in this sector. Thus the deadly pattern of Varlian

overlords, aided by Gamorrean and Rodian henchmen, is established — a pattern that continues to plague the galaxy to this day ...

Cosmo assembles a team of slaves for a very special mission. There's one final task they need to perform before leaving Forhilnor behind ...

He leads a commando-like raid, using the final stunner charges left in their one stolen weapon, but the key to the operation's success is Cosmo's ability to skywalk.

Still, during the operation, Cosmo is cornered at last by a Gamorrean — there's no way to escape, and the stunner is empty. The Gamorrean has a blaster and can kill Cosmo where he stands — but he does not. This is the same Gamorrean Cosmo had saved all that time ago during the earthquake. He lets Cosmo go.

The vast fleet of ships lift off on autopilot with the millions of slaves aboard, heading at last for freedom ...

Leego and his lieutenants march into the Governor's court. The Governor's is shocked by the intrusion, but Leego tells him to shut up. His lieutenants spray the Governor and everyone else in the room with the plague serum. "We're sick of serving under you," says Leego. "And now, you're all going to die." At this very moment, he says, Rodians are dumping Changa Bloodrot serum into the palace water tanks — but Leego wanted the Governor to know who had bested him before he died.

The Governor and the others Varlians panic — they have only moments left to live. Kaxa curses Leego, who is savoring this moment of triumph ...

But nothing happens — the plague serum is ineffective; no one is dying.

Leego realizes he's made a *big* mistake — the Gamorreans guards swarm and dismember him. But the Governor realizes that he's made an even bigger mistake himself — he let the slaves go when there no plague at all! The slaves had faked the signs of the Changa Bloodrot in order to gain their freedom. Kaxa orders his Gamorrean guards to take off after the slaves and bring them home.

An excerpt from *The Human Exodus*: The human and Bith slaves are all *en route* to Forhilnor, a harsh, giant planet where the Varlians intend to imprison the civilian populations of all the worlds they conquer. As Paxton Solo and Dale Hender look back on the green-blue paradise of a world they are leaving behind, they agree that it should be named Corellia, in honor of their dead Captain, Antonia Corelli. They vow that one day they will return, and make that lush world their peaceful home.

The Gamorrean fleet is in hot pursuit of the escaping slaves. Incredibly, the slaves are heading *toward* the Bloodstars — even though Forhilnor itself has moved far away from them. The Gamorreans are delighted — the slaves will never be able to escape that way ...

Guards burst into the throne room — the Force crystal is gone!

Cosmo leads the millions of slaves in seeing with their minds: they all close their eyes, and see beyond their ships' hulls, see the tightly packed red stars of the globular cluster blocking their path. They concentrate, concentrate, concentrate ... *and the Bloodstars stars begin to move*, parting in a huge pyrotechnical display, making way for their ships, as millions of minds focus all their access to the Force through the stolen crystal.

The crystal begins to vibrate under the strain. Cracks are appearing in it. As the crystal begins to show signs of fatigue, so does Cosmo himself. Without knowing it, he's been sustaining himself all these years by drawing power from the crystal ...

The Gamorreans are still in hot pursuit, but, at last, the ships carrying the slaves make it past the Bloodstars. Finally, under the strain of pushing the stars aside, the crystal shatters, and Cosmo collapses to the ground. Over the course of a few minutes, he ages forty years, growing gray and wrinkled and infirm.

The red stars rush back together under their own gravity, crushing the pursuing fleet, hundreds of Gamorrean craft crashing into the great fiery orbs ...

Free of the combined gravity well of the Bloodstars, the escaping ships go to hyperdrive, setting a course for Corellia, the verdant, unspoiled world Cosmo has told them about ...

It will still take weeks of travel to reach Corellia — weeks that Cosmo no longer has left. Fading rapidly, he names his successor: Ridbrek, the Mon Calamari, will be the new leader of the freed slaves, taking them into the promised land.

Sallee and young Freedom are with Cosmo as he passes on. They promise to bury Cosmo with honor next to the fabled tomb of Antonia Corelli on Corellia. And they promise that, like her, he won't be forgotten — Sallee will *write down* the history of their slave days, and teach all of their descendants to read the story of their savior, Cosmo Hender, the Skywalker ...

Read the first 11,000 words of this novel.

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George Lucas's Monsters and Aliens, Volume 1:

Alien Exodus

Opening Chapters by Robert J. Sawyer

January 1995 · 11,000 words

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A note from Rob (2003) [*this note appears at the beginning of both the sample chapters and the outline*]:

In 1994, Ace Books — which had just finished publishing my Quintaglio Ascension trilogy — asked me to write a trilogy of novels outlining the origins of the races that make up the ***Star Wars*** universe.

At that time, Ace was still negotiating the details of a licensing agreement with Lucasfilm, and it looked like I'd be able to use the actual alien races that had appeared in the original trilogy of ***Star Wars*** films (*A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*).

I had never been keen on doing work-for-hire media tie-ins, but my then-agent urged me to give this project a try. So I wrote a 10,000-word outline for the first novel, which I was going to call ***Alien Exodus***, and 11,000 words of sample chapters.

However, there were considerable delays in finalizing the details of the licensing agreement with Lucasfilm. By the time the book contracts were ready for my signature, it had been established that I couldn't use any of the actual races from ***Star Wars***, and so I bowed out of the project.

Ultimately, Ace brought in writer Deborah Chester to produce the books. She, of course, started from scratch, and created her own trilogy with all new aliens; these books were published under the umbrella title ***Lucasfilm Alien Chronicles***.

Below are the opening chapters I wrote for the novel; also available is the outline I wrote.

No violation of Lucasfilm's copyright or trademarks is intended. I never signed a contract for this work, and was never paid for it, so I offer this material here as fan

fiction.

George Lucas's Monsters and Aliens, Volume 1:

Alien Exodus

by Robert J. Sawyer

Written in January 1995 · Opening chapters · 11,000 words

Chapter 1

An even longer time ago,
in a galaxy far, far away ....

"Shhh! You'll get yourself killed!" Cosmo Hender spoke forcefully but softly. The guard would be here any moment, and Bisbee was gibbering on about getting away, about being free, about a better life. He did that more and more lately: far too many years of slave labor had addled the old man's brain.

"Shhh!" Cosmo said again. He and his mate Sallee shared a lower-level bunk; Bisbee had the bottom bunk on the other side of the aisle.

Sallee touched Cosmo's arm, urging him to be silent. The footfalls of the guard's bantha-leather boots were fast approaching.

"Got to escape," said Bisbee.

Cosmo nodded in the dim light. "One day," he whispered. "But for now, be quiet!"

"No talking!" snapped the guard, who surged forward to stand in the aisle between the two bunk beds. Cosmo could hear the timbers supporting the upper bunk rattling slightly. Dant, who slept above him and Sallee, was trembling enough to shake them.

The human slaves had an expression: *A face that only a mother could love.* Cosmo looked at the Gamorrean guard in the dim light. He had oily greenish-gray skin, two small yellow-white horns rising from his receding forehead, tiny black eyes under massive brows, a flat piglike snout, and a wide protruding jaw with four short tusks curving up from it. But Cosmo knew that even the guard's mother had never loved him — Gamorreans, born in litters of eight, devoured their parents shortly after birth.

Bisbee was also looking at the Gamorrean, his eyes wild and unfocused. "Freedom," he said in a high-pitched, crazy voice. "We will be free!"

"I said no talking!" roared the Gamorrean. His voice was deep and wet, rumbling like an upset stomach; his breath was foul, smelling of rotting meat and sour Gamorrean wine.

"Freedom," said Bisbee again, cackling the word as if it were the punch line to a joke only he

had heard. "Free-dom!"

"Silence!" shouted the Gamorrean. The timbers supporting the upper bunk were now clacking together like chattering teeth. Cosmo hoped Dant wouldn't again lose control of his bladder. He held Sallee tightly.

"Freedom!" This time Bisbee shouted the word. Sallee was biting her lower lip. Somewhere else in the compound, a baby had started crying. "Freedom!"

"If it's freedom you want," rumbled the Gamorrean, pulling his short sword from its scabbard, "then it's freedom you shall have!" With an arm as thick around as a human's thigh, the Gamorrean lashed out. Cosmo heard the sound of slitting flesh, and the harsher sound of the knife carving right through bone. Bisbee's final call of "Freedom!" was cut off in mid-word.

Blood was seeping into the compound's dirt floor. More children were crying — and maybe some adults, too. The Gamorrean bent his massive body from the waist and pulled up the rude, gray blanket that had been covering Bisbee. He wiped his sword clean on it, grunted in satisfaction, tossed the blanket on top of Bisbee, and continued lumbering down the aisle, checking on the other slaves.

Cosmo exhaled noisily. It would probably fall to him to remove Bisbee's body come the morning; for tonight, he and Sallee would have to sleep opposite a corpse.

Once the Gamorrean was out of earshot, Cosmo heard Dant whisper two wistful words from the upper bunk. "Lucky Bisbee."

A huge clanging noise reverberated throughout the compound. The Gamorrean guard responsible for this section of the human dome had finished his rounds and closed the great iron door behind him. Almost immediately, Cosmo heard another, more distant clang as a second door slammed shut, and then, moments later, he heard a third clang. There were nine doors in total; each of the nine wedge-shaped sections of the human dome housed about 13,000 slaves. Every night a team of guards would walk through the ancient dome, checking that each bed had at least one occupant. Slaves did occasionally escape from the walled encampment, but none of Forhilnor's native life was edible by any of the slave races, and there was no way off the planet.

Two more muffled clangs: doors four and five being slammed shut.

The slave encampment was said to be five hundred standard years old. The Varlian Overlords doubtless knew for sure, but they rarely deigned to speak to slaves. Tales of the outside universe had been passed down from generation to generation, but how reliable they were, no one knew for sure. But even the longest-lived of the slave races, the sturdy Kitonaks, still were in their third generation of bondage.

Three more clangs, one so far away and faint that Cosmo barely heard it; doors six through eight were now closed.

Thirteen thousand slaves here in this section, thought Cosmo. Another thirteen thousand in each of the other eight sections. No one had ever taught him mathematics, but Cosmo had managed to puzzle out the total once, using pebbles. Nine groups of thirteen totaled a hundred and seventeen pebbles, and each of his pebbles had stood for a thousand men and women. One hundred and seventeen thousand human beings, every one of them a slave.

And, of course, humans weren't the only slaves. There were a total of nine slave domes in the encampment — nine different slave races. From what Cosmo had seen, there were pretty much equal numbers of each type of slave — perhaps a few more Sullusts then there are humans; perhaps somewhat fewer Ortolans. Still, even if the humans represented an average sized group, nine groups of a hundred-odd thousand was a larger number than Cosmo knew the name of.

A final clang — and, as usual, sighs of relief from hundreds of bunks. The guards were gone, night was here, and the slaves could indulge in the only peace they ever knew — the peace of unconscious oblivion, the peace of sleep. Tomorrow would be no better than today, but, then again, slaves rarely thought about tomorrow.

Cosmo hugged Sallee close to him, but was careful not to squeeze her too hard. She smiled at him in the dim moonlight coming through the glass bricks interspersed with the solid ones in the dome's ceiling. He released her, and laid a hand on her belly. He held it there until he felt the baby within move. It was wondrous.

Cosmo kissed Sallee. "Be careful," she said, her voice full of concern. Cosmo nodded, tried to smile reassuringly, and rolled off the lumpy bunk and on to the packed-dirt floor, wet with blood from Bisbee.

In the dark, Cosmo found his sandals, put them on, smiled again at Sallee, and began his way down the aisle between the bunks. As he passed by, some of the humans reached out to touch him: a pat on the shoulder here, a brief contact with his hand there. Some whispered things to him: "Be safe." "Good luck." "I'll pray for you."

Cosmo nodded, squeezed outstretched hands, and spoke words of encouragement. It took him several minutes in the dim light to reach the end of this aisle of bunks, and several more to make it down the perpendicular aisle. He heard the sounds of a baby crying, and squatted down, peering in at the lower bunk, where the child was being held by his mother. Cosmo stroked the thin hair on the child's head, and spoke soothingly to it for several moments. The baby quieted, the mother smiled, and Cosmo continued on, finally reaching his destination.

Jenkins was already there, and Portz arrived from the opposite direction only moments after Cosmo. Jenkins and Portz were the biggest and strongest humans in the compound. The former was tall and broad-shouldered; the, latter wide and blocky, with arms like tree trunks. Cosmo hated not helping them, but although his labors in the quarry had left him strong, there was little that his strength could add to what those two could do. They bent down and, using wooden beams taken from one of the bunk beds, slowly pried up a great stone slab that had been inlaid flush with the flooring. As he always did, Portz grunted loudly while exerting himself, and the wood groaned as if it were about to snap, but finally the slab was prized up and swung aside, revealing a pitch-black hole in the ground. A ladder made of odd bits of wood bound together with shreds of cloth ran down one side of the hole.

Portz's beefy hand clamped down on Cosmo's shoulder. "Be safe."

Cosmo nodded, took hold of the ladder, and climbed down. It had taken ages, working with bare hands and drinking bowls, for the slaves to secretly dig this tunnel. Cosmo had had two of his fingernails torn free during the digging. About a body-length down, they'd run into a migration of Fohilnorian razor worms; two men had died during the encounter. But at last, the tunnel had been completed.

Cosmo reached the bottom of the ladder, and started walking along the horizontal part of the tunnel. He heard Portz's grunting above as he and Jenkins replaced the covering slab. Cosmo was now sealed in. His eyes were wide open, but he couldn't see a single thing. Nor could he hear anything; the dirt walls of the tunnel muffled any sounds. The tunnel was three hundred and ninety-two paces long; Cosmo counted them as he walked. A clod of dirt dropped down from one of the gaps between the rough timbers that shored up the roof and exploded on Cosmo's head. He reached up and used splayed fingers to clear the dirt out of his greasy, unkempt hair; slaves were only allowed to bathe once every eight days.

Continuing along, Cosmo tried not to think about the possibility of another herd of razor worms passing this way. He also tried to keep from thinking about how precarious the tunnel was, how likely it was to someday become his tomb.

It was rarely cold on Forhilnor's surface; its compact blue-white sun saw to that. But here, deep beneath the ground, it was cold indeed. If he could have seen anything at all, Cosmo had no doubt that he would have seen his breath. His ragged clothing — torn and stained shirt made from coarse wormsilk raised by Kubazi slaves, a belt of knotted cord, ragged pants that stopped halfway down his calves, and dewback-leather sandals — provided little insulation. Still, Cosmo was one of the few men in the human compound who could honestly say the chattering of his teeth was entirely due to the temperature. Cosmo himself knew he could feel fear as deeply as anyone, but he never showed it externally and that, as much as anything, had been what had led the others to look up to him.

He was three-quarters of the way along the tunnel now. Something furry and warm moved over his foot; dakarat, probably. He kicked dirt after it.

Cosmo didn't crave leadership — he was positively Sullust-like in his modesty — but neither did he shy away from it. He'd long thought that a leader should be an older person, with a wise, wrinkled brow, and grizzled hair and beard. Cosmo had long since lost track of his own age; with no holidays to mark the passing of time, only modest weather changes with the seasons, and with Forhilnor's usually cloudy sky obscuring the constellations, it was a chore to keep track of how many years had passed. Cosmo felt young and hale. He had a smooth face and brown hair highlighted with gold and red rather than gray. But whether he was thirty of forty, or perhaps even older, he didn't know. That Sallee was at least ten years his junior, though, was clear; he remembered well many older slaves who had died before she was born.

Cosmo walked into a dirt wall, and cursed. He'd let his mind wander, and had lost count of how many paces he'd covered. He was now at the end of the horizontal part of the tunnel. Another rude ladder was propped up here, and he climbed up it. The cover over the opening at this end was a simple wooden disk, the planks making it up sealed with sap against rain. He pushed it aside. Although it was now well after sunset, and Patroob, largest of Forhilnor's three moons, was in its new phase, and therefore providing no smudge of illumination behind the clouds, it was still infinitely brighter above ground then below, and Cosmo found himself squinting slightly as he climbed up the ladder. He was on the second-highest rung when the branch forming that rung snapped apart. Cosmo fought for balance, his hand badly scraped. He exhaled, and finished climbing out into the forest.

Cosmo stopped and listened. There were sounds of small animals moving in the carpet of leaves covering the forest floor, and the plaintive nighttime call of a crimson flyer from high up in

the closest tree. He also thought he heard intermittent snatches of distant speech, but perhaps he was imagining that. He looked around in the dim light, gnarled, gray-barked trunks rising up all around him, got his bearings, and began to walk.

A short distance away, Cosmo could see the brick wall that surrounded the slave encampment. It was perhaps three times as tall as he was, and was surmounted with ancient, rusting spikes. Farther along, rising already hundreds of paces into the air, he could see through the trees bits of the accursed building, half-completed. How he hated that thing!

He continued to walk, but had only gotten a few dozen pace from the tunnel's mouth when he caught sight of something large moving off to his left. His heart skipped a beat, and he froze in his tracks.

"Cosmo?" said a warbling voice, each of the two syllables sounding protracted and shaky.

Cosmo breathed a sigh of relief. It was too dark to see colors, but he knew the velvety skin of the rotund creature was pale blue. "Hello, Jax."

"It is you!" said Jax Hobo, his diamond-shaped ear flaps dancing in excitement. "How good to see you, my friend!" He moved close and touched Cosmo's arm.

Cosmo smiled. "I've missed you, too, Jax. But let's hurry." They began walking side by side through the dark forest, Jax's shorter legs requiring three paces for every two of Cosmo's.

Like Cosmo, Jax had been born in captivity. His ancestors had come from a world called Orto — or, at least, that's what the stories passed down from parent to child said. Orto supposedly had a red sun, and was thought to be much colder than Forhilnor; the thick layers of blubber beneath an Ortolan's baggy hide had evolved to provide insulation against that cold, although they now made life even more uncomfortable for the Ortolan slaves on this world.

Like all Ortolans, Jax had beady black eyes, great floppy ears which could be extended to cool him down or wrapped tightly about the head to warm it up, and a flexible proboscis as long as a human's forearm. He had a large round body, stubby legs, and powerful arms that ended in four chubby fingers and a not-quite-opposable thumb. To make up for this, each finger ended in a small suction pad.

"I despair every time I use the escape tunnel from my dome," said Jax in his reedy voice. "I keep thinking it's going to collapse on me. At least Munnin Munb could burrow his way out if he got trapped."

Cosmo grunted. "I worry about the same thing." He breathed in the cool night air, savoring it. "Still," he said, "it's wonderful to be free, even if it is only for a short time."

They continued walking. Eventually, they came to a place where the ground was moving: the exit from another tunnel. The slaves had originally hoped that only one exit would be needed out in the forest — it would have been much easier to hide. But thick incursions of solid rock ran under the slave encampment making it impossible for all the tunnels to join up underground. A total of five exits ended up being needed.

Cosmo and Jax bent down to help remove the tunnel's cover. Staring up at them were the grim yellow eyes of Fob Discordia, a Twi'lek. Discordia used his two arms, and the two muscular tentacles coming off of the back of his head, to help push himself up out of the tunnel entrance.

Although it had been some fifty days since he'd seen either Cosmo or Jax, Discordia acknowledged their presence with typical Twi'lek reserve, merely nodding at each of them in turn.

The Twi'lek slave dome was adjacent to the Mon Calamari dome. A tunnel ran from the Calamari one into the Twi'lek one, and a separate tunnel ran out into the forest. As soon as Discordia was up on the ground, with one headtail dangling over his right shoulder and the other trailing down his back, a pinkish-red webbed Calamari hand appeared on the lip of the opening in the ground. Cosmo and Discordia bent down to help old Ridbrek up out of the hole. Her bulging yellow eyes blinked repeatedly as she came up onto the ground. The wattles beneath her chin were long and frayed, a sign of her advanced years. Her voice was deep, like a male human's; indeed, Cosmo had to remind himself periodically that the Ridbrek was female. "Thank you," she said.

Her wrinkled reddish skin was clean; unlike humans, the Mon Calamari slaves got to swim daily — as amphibians, their hides would dry up and crack without constant remoistening. She quickly stepped away from the hole, so that the third person coming up this tunnel could make it to the surface. That was Galarax, a Bith. Like all her people, Galarax had bone-white skin, giant lidless black eyes, a recessed nose, baggy folds covering the lower part of her face, and a massive cranium, housing a brain twice as large as a human's. The tunnel from the Bith dome joined up with the Twi'lek/Calamari one while still within the slave encampment.

"How is Sallee?" asked Galarax the moment she was out of the tunnel. Cosmo and Jax were bent down, repositioning the wooden cover over the tunnel's opening. "She's fine," said Cosmo. "The baby will be here in perhaps thirty days."

"Good," said Galarax. "She is a brave, intelligent woman." Cosmo nodded; to be called intelligent by a Bith was high praise indeed.

"Come," said Ridbrek, the Mon Calamari. "We must hurry."

The five of them — Cosmo Hender the human, Jax Hobo the Ortolan, Fob Discordia the Twi'lek, Ridbrek the Mon Calamari, and Galarax the Bith — moved through the forest, their widely assorted pairs of feet kicking up dead leaves as they did so. But although it had been Ridbrek who had urged alacrity, she was soon bringing up the rear. Cosmo fell back, and supported her bulging red forearm with his right hand. "Are you all right?" he asked.

She nodded her bulbous head, and one of her vast yellow eyes swung to look at Cosmo. "I'm getting too old for this," she said.

They continued on for a short distance, until they reached a small outcrop of rock where no trees grew. The others were waiting for them: Ugerat the Kubaz, leaning against a rock; Taffee McMal facing into what wind there was in typical Kitonak fashion, mouselike Munnin Munb squatting on a boulder, and Slap the hammerheaded Ithorian, whose strange, bent body was quite comfortable standing on its own.

Nine species — nine worlds. Nine enslaved races. Cosmo moved into the center of the small open area. "Good evening, everyone. Slap and Munnin Munb are probably wide awake, but I bet the rest of us are exhausted." Ithorians and Sullusts were nocturnal; Jax Hobo flapped his floppy ears in response to Cosmo's little joke, and a barely audible chuckle that sounded like eggshells being ground up issued from the Kubaz's long snout "I call this meeting of the secret slave council to order."

"I move," said Slap, his wide T-shaped head bobbing on its thick ribbonlike neck, "that we disband." He spoke in strange, self-harmonizing dual voices, nouns and references to himself issuing from the vertical mouth slit on the right-hand side of his neck, verbs and references to others coming from the left-hand mouth.

Cosmo felt his eyes go wide as he turned to face Slap. Slap's eyes were glowing faintly, as they normally did. "Disband?" said Cosmo. "Why would you suggest that?"

"Because," replied the Ithorian, "we have accomplished nothing — and we never will. We congratulate ourselves on having dug tunnels. Burrowing underground may be all right for a Sullust, but we are no closer to freedom for our peoples."

Ugerat, the Kubaz, spoke. "I agree." His voice was deep and the volume low — Kubindi, his homeworld, apparently had a much higher oxygen content than did most of the other homeworlds, and so the Kubazi had developed small lungs. Members of his race were incapable of producing loud sounds. "We were all born slaves, and we will all die slaves."

"We can't give up!" said Jax Hobo, his blue trunk fairly vibrating with indignation. "Seven Ortolans died in digging the tunnel from my dome. You, Slap — didn't you lose several Ithorians in constructing your exit? And now you suggest that they died for nothing?"

"I honor their memory in my own way," said Slap, clusters of words alternating between his two mouths. "Do not presume with me, fat one."

"Why, you piece of wasted food — don't you insult me!"

Cosmo raised his hands, palms out, but then immediately dropped them. Amongst humans, that gesture was meant to calm a group, but he remembered quickly that it was also a Kitonak call to battle. Damn, but it was difficult dealing with so many different psychologies and customs. "Please, my friends," he said. "We'll get nowhere fighting amongst ourselves. Our enemy is the Overlords — we have to remember that."

"We will get nowhere regardless," said Slap. "Unless you have some bright idea, human." He said the species name as though it were an insult.

"My bright idea," said Cosmo, levelly, trying to control his tone, "is simply to watch for any opportunity, any at all, to escape. There are fleets of spaceships on this world — enough to carry all the slaves to freedom. There must be some way to get to them."

"Friend Cosmo," said Ugerat in his soft voice, "even if we could get to them, what good would that do? Can you fly a ship? Can any of us?"

Cosmo turned to Ugerat. In the darkness of night, the Kubazi had removed the goggles he normally wore during the day, and his large red eyes stared out at him like pools of human blood.

"No," said Cosmo, at last. "No, I cannot fly a ship — yet. But if a Gamorrean can do it, how difficult can it be?"

There were signs of amusement amongst some of them. Cosmo always seemed to know when a light comment was just what was needed. He smiled at each of the others in turn — taking care to keep his teeth covered, lest he offend the Twi'lek, Fob Discordia. "We cannot give up. As

some of you know, my mate Sallee is with child. I do not want my son or daughter to be raised a slave."

At that moment, the clouds overhead parted. Jax pointed up with one sausage-like blue finger. "Look!" he said. Forhilnor's skies were almost always overcast, its blue sun rarely seen directly, its three moons usually nothing more than smudges against unrelieved silver-gray.

Dominating the break in the sky were the Bloodstars. According to what little history Cosmo had been able to pick up from overhearing conversations amongst the guards, something called a small globular cluster, consisting of perhaps a thousand red stars, had, for the last million years or so, been passing through this arm of the galaxy. Its progress was slow — its size had not noticeably changed in Cosmo's lifetime. The cluster of suns apparently presented some sort of impediment to space travel, although none of the slaves really understood the details of exactly why.

"It's an omen," said Jax, still pointing.

"The Bloodstars?" said Discordia. Like most of the species present, Twi'leks used iron as their oxygen carrier, and so had red blood. "Surely an omen of death."

"No, no, no," said Jax, his trunk vibrating. "The opening of the clouds — a reminder that there *is* a universe out there, a universe that must hold something better for us than this."

Cosmo could see Galarax looking at the ground. With their enormous brains, Biths had little use for superstitious talk, but they were too polite to say anything. Kubazi had no such manners; Ugerat made a snorting sound, although mercifully, it was quiet enough that Jax perhaps didn't hear it.

"An omen," repeated Jax, with conviction.

Cosmo nodded at his friend. "Let us hope so. Let us all hope for something better."

"We *had* something better," said Ridbrek, the ancient female Mon Calamari. "We had something better last year." She swung both of her bulging yellow eyes to look at Cosmo. "Conditions are deteriorating — surely you've noticed that." She spread her red arms, and looked from face to face. "You all know that my job is tending the herds of dorgabeasts that are used as food animals for several of the slave races. Well, the Overlords have again cut the quality and quantity of grain made available to me. The result is leaner animals, stringier meat. I have been breeding the dorgabeasts carefully, trying to produce hardier stock. But the difference in food quality is obvious."

"Hear, hear!" said Jax. "They never feed us enough!" The Ortolan slapped his giant belly. "My skin is hanging off me more than usual. It leaves me exhausted."

Ugerat snorted. "You are obsessed with food, Ortolan."

"First order of survival," said Jax. "Not all of us can get by on eating bugs."

Ugerat shot the long tongue out of the end of his short gray trunk; a Kubazi sign of derision. But Ridbrek raised her left hand. "I'm exhausted, too, I must say. I'm getting to old for this."

"`This,'" said Discordia, his headtails slithering about his neck, "is being alive; living as slave is

better than being dead. Not by much, but it *is* better." The Twi'lek looked at Cosmo. "You have taken the role of our leader, human. Perhaps you should demand an audience with the governor of this dusty world, and insist that our rations be improved."

Munnin Munb's huge dark eyes blinked. "Kaxa would kill him. He would kill any of us who spoke up."

"Governor Kaxa *is* the problem," said Taffee McMal. "Mine is the longest-lived slave race; I remember well Kaxa's predecessor. Gada was harsh and cruel, too, as Kaxa is — but Kaxa is also mad. We see him rarely, of course, but I've listened to the guards talk. Kaxa thinks of himself as a god — and there's nothing more dangerous than an insane god." The Kitonak paused. "And I agree with Ridbrek — I am exhausted."

"A Kitonak, an Ortolan, and a Mon Calamari all complaining of exhaustion?" said Cosmo. "Is there possibly something more amiss than just a reduction in food quality?"

"I must confess to being tired more than usual, too," said Galarax. Cosmo assumed the Bith was looking at him, although it was very difficult to tell — the giant-brained beings had eyes of solid black. "Do you not feel it, Cosmo?"

Cosmo shook his head, and then a moment later remembered to speak, since to Kubazi and Mon Calamari, a head shake was a sign of affirmation rather than negation. "No. After a day in the quarries, I'm beat, of course. But I don't feel any unusual fatigue."

The Bith tipped his head, fascinated.

"Anyway," said Cosmo, "our next step is clear: if we are ever to escape, we need to learn something of how to pilot the governor's spaceships; clearly, they are our only way off this planet. Either that, or we must find some guards who perhaps could be enticed to help us. Taffee, you mentioned hearing some guards speaking disparagingly about the Governor. We should all keep track of such things — see if we can put together a list of possible allies."

"What could we possibly offer them that they would want?" asked Ugerat.

"That, too, is something we must find out," said Cosmo. "If there are guards sufficiently displeased with the governor, they might even help us merely out of spite."

"And delobaps might fly out of my peltran," observed Ugerat. "But I don't consider it likely."

"We should be heading back," said the ever cautious Munnin Munb.

Cosmo nodded. "We'll meet again the next time Patroob is in its new phase." Patroob was the largest of Forhilnor's three moons; tonight it was invisible. "Be safe, everyone."

"Peace be in your hearts," said Jax Hobo.

"Endure," said Ugerat.

Taffee the Kitonak and Ridbrek the Mon Calamari each made the traditional farewell hand signs of their peoples. The group broke up. Ugerat, Taffee, Munnin Munb, and Slap the Ithorian headed off to the east; the entrance to their tunnel was almost two hundred paces away in that direction.

Cosmo Hender, Jax Hobo, Ridbrek, Fob Discordia, and Galarax headed off to the west. When they came to the first tunnel entrance, the Mon Calamari, the Twi'lek, and the Bith descended down into the dark. Cosmo and Jax replaced the cover over their tunnel for them, and brushed dead leaves over the cover to better help conceal it. Not that anyone ever came out this way — but still, better safe than sorry.

As they continued along, Cosmo and the pudgy blue Ortolan chatted. "You know, sometimes I think about not going back," said Jax.

"There's nothing out here that you could eat," said Cosmo. He made his tone light. "And I know how much you enjoy your food."

"True, true," said Jax. "But walking back down that tunnel is the hardest thing I ever do. To go back to that life ..."

Cosmo nodded. He looked up. The canopy of treetops was partially obscuring the overhead view, but he could see that the clouds were still parted, and the Bloodstars still visible, a thousand crimson eyes looking down upon them. They had come to the entrance to Cosmo's tunnel; Jax's was another thirty paces farther on, on the other side of the deep-running wall of rock.

"Peace be in your hearts," said Jax, apparently momentarily forgetting that humans had but one. Cosmo lifted his hand in a wave, and lowered himself down the short ladder into the tunnel. He smiled up at the Ortolan's round form as Jax used his stubby fingers to position the cover over the tunnels mouth. Once again, Cosmo was enveloped by blackness. He felt the crumbly walls of the tunnel to get his bearings, then started walking down its length. But he suddenly cursed, realizing that he'd forgotten to ask Jax a question — at the last meeting of the slave council, the Ortolan had agreed to check on whether it was true that Leego, the quarry taskmaster, had been reprimanded by Governor Kaxa for being too harsh with the slaves. Cosmo turned around, climbed the ladder, pushed the tunnel cover aside, popped halfway up out of the hole in the ground — and froze.

A Gamorrean was about twenty paces away, his back to Cosmo. The burly piglike alien hadn't heard Cosmo emerging from the tunnel, apparently — the sounds of fallen leaves shifting in the breeze and the night songs of flyers had obscured any noise he might have made.

Standing in front of the Gamorrean facing toward Cosmo was Jax, his short blue arms lifted high, stubby, suction-cupped fingers splayed out. Jax's ear flaps were pressed tightly against this skull, a traditional sign of terror. Cosmo glanced up; the clouds had closed — whatever good omen their parting might have represented had passed.

It was hard to tell from this angle, but the Gamorrean seemed to have a weapon trained on Jax — probably a hand blaster, although it might even have been a blaster pulse-rifle.

"I'd kill you here," the Gamorrean was saying, its voice low and rumbling, "but then I'd have to carry your fat corpse back to the encampment. Move!"

Jax's ears had unraveled from his head — a sigh of astonishment. He'd clearly caught sight of Cosmo in the background, but the Gamorrean was apparently not skilled at reading Ortolan body language. He gestured with his weapon, and Jax turned around and began to march.

Cosmo had to intervene, of course. But how? He might be able to sneak up on the Gamorrean,

but then again it would only take a snapping twig to give away his presence. Cosmo had no weapon, although perhaps that broken branch lying on the ground over there could be used as a club. But if it were partly rotten, it might just break apart when brought down on the Gamorrean's skull. Nor could he just jump the Gamorrean from behind; the guard weighed more than double what Cosmo did.

Jax and the guard were receding from view. It was dark enough that Cosmo might indeed lose sight of them if they got any further away. He began to walk gingerly, trying to match his own footfalls to the Gamorrean's.

"What were you doing out here, anyway?" asked the guard.

Jax shrugged his rounded shoulders. "Just getting some fresh air."

"Don't be smart with me, you sack of blue lard. Do you know what they'll do with you? Leego will have you strung up by that ugly trunk of yours. How did you escape from the encampment?"

"I climbed the wall."

"You?" The Gamorrean roared with laughter. "I seriously doubt that."

Cosmo's legs were longer than the Gamorrean's. He'd managed to close some of the distance between them. "I did," said Jax. "I climbed the wall, *then dropped down*. Do you hear? I dropped down."

Good boy, Jax! thought Cosmo. It had to be around here somewhere ...

"They'll beat the truth out of you, slave," said the Gamorrean. "They'll —"

The Gamorrean stopped short. One moment, Jax had been there, a few paces in front of him; the next, he was gone —

The Gamorrean looked left and right in the darkness. He took another step forward, and Cosmo leapt, jumping unto the guard's broad shoulders. The guard let out a grunt under the impact, and teetered forward. Suddenly a blue hand reached up from the hole in the ground and grabbed the guard's left ankle. Jax pulled with all his might, while Cosmo simultaneously boxed the Gamorrean's ears. The creature lost his balance and tumbled forward with a great thud, but soon it was scrambling for his blaster. Cosmo could just make out the sidearm in the darkness: not a blaster at all, but merely a stunner pistol. He moved forward, bringing his sandaled foot up in a kick, sending the blaster pinwheeling through the air. It was lost in the darkness. The Gamorrean roared with anger, and tried to surge to his feet. Jax, meanwhile, had hauled himself back up on the ground, out of the tunnel entrance. He immediately hauled up the small wooden ladder after him, and swung it with both arms, cracking it over the back of the Gamorrean's skull. Bloody spit sprayed from the guard's mouth as he staggered forward, his four upturned tusks flashing in what little light there was.

Cosmo danced backward, as the creature tumbled face first into the carpet of leaves. A moment later, though, he was rising again to his feet. Jax took what was left of the part of the ladder he'd been holding, and smashed it over the back of the Gamorrean's head again. The Gamorrean went down. Cosmo peered at the thing's massive back in the darkness. It was heavy up and down — the guard was still alive, but unconscious. Jax had moved further into the forest. His beady black eyes were better at night vision than a human's; in short order, he found the

blaster pistol. Jax returned, holding it with the suction pads of three fingers. He glanced at the indicator on the pistol grip: five purple dots in a row; five discharges left.

"That could come in very handy," said Cosmo.

The Ortolan bobbed his trunk in assent. "What do we do with the Gamorrean?"

That was a very good question. "We could leave him here," said Cosmo.

Jax's small eyes locked on Cosmo's own. The Ortolan's ear flaps were moving in agitation. He shook his head ever so slightly.

Cosmo realized that his friend was right. They couldn't just leave the guard there. He'd eventually awake, stagger back to the encampment, and report the runaway slaves. If he was good at telling apart individuals alien to his own species, he might even be able to identify Cosmo Hender and Jax Hobo from amongst the thousands of slaves. Regardless, he knew now of the hole in the ground — a hole that led to the carefully dug tunnel leading back to the Ortolan slave dome. And if the Overlords learned that one tunnel existed, they'd begin a systematic search for others ...

Cosmo had never wanted to be *de facto* leader of the slaves — and, indeed, some, like Slap, disapproved of the way things had developed. But there was no doubt of the reality of the situation: Cosmo Hender, human male of indeterminate years, *was* the leader of Forhilnor's slave population. And sometimes leaders had to make very difficult decisions.

Cosmo had never killed before. Oh, he'd fantasized about crushing Leego's ugly green head with a mallet, about turning a Gamorrean's short sword onto its owner. Cosmo hated captivity, and hated his captors.

But he had no choice. Slaves had worked hard building these tunnels; many had died in their construction. Cosmo looked down at the Gamorrean, with its oily greenish-gray skin. He drew breath, drew strength, and began unknotting the thick cord he used as a belt to hold up his tattered pants. When it was free in his hands, he slipped it over the Gamorrean's head — it catching on the beast's protruding snout, and catching again on one of its tusks, before Cosmo got it down around its thick neck. Jax looked away, and Cosmo twisted the rope around then yanked it tight. The Gamorrean gasped, perhaps shocked to consciousness by the attack. "Don't —" it rumbled.

Cosmo closed his own eyes, and pulled tighter, jerking the rope back — once, twice, a third time. The Gamorrean made a gurgling sound, then slumped forward. While Cosmo held the rope tightly, Jax moved in and felt the back of the Gamorrean's neck, were the single main artery rose up into its brain case.

"No pulse," said Jax.

Cosmo release his sling. He wanted to fling the rope away, to never see it again, but Leego would ask what had become of his belt if he showed up at the quarry tomorrow without it, and there was nowhere that he could acquire a non-tainted piece of cord. He fed it through the rough loops on his pant's waist, and knotted it up.

Without a word between them, Jax and Cosmo dragged the body a hundred paces from the entrance to the Ortolan tunnel, then, with their bare hands, dug a shallow grave and rolled the

massive corpse into it. They used their palms to push the dirt back into the hole they'd made in the ground, and covered it over with leaves and branches. It took most of what was left of the night to do it. At no time did any stars poke through the cloud cover.

Jax left down the Ortolan tunnel. Cosmo made his way to the human one, sad and lonely and feeling unclean. There was a faint purple glow on the eastern horizon; the day would soon break. Cosmo hurried down the dark cold tunnel back to his slave's bunk, and the arms of his mate, who held him tight as he shook until the guards arrived to wake the slaves for another day of hard labor.

Chapter 2

The quarry was like a vast wound in the landscape, carved deep and wide as though the cut had been made with a Sullust scoopknife. Its sides, each more than a thousand paces long, were yellowish white, the color of the richly veined marble found here. Clouds of powdered marble often blew across the bottom, stinging the faces and lungs of the slaves. Only the Kubazi were afforded some small relief: their eyes were so sensitive to bright light that they literally could not see during Forhilnor's day, and so they were each assigned a pair of smoked-glass goggles. Those goggles kept the stone dust out of their eyes.

Not that there were any Kubazi working in this particular part of the quarry. Cosmo had for years worked with a mixed team of two hundred human and Twi'lek slaves, carving blocks of the white stone. It was enormously hard work, and their quotas were almost impossible to meet. And, after getting no sleep at all last night, Cosmo was already exhausted, even though the ferocious glare of the sun, little abated by the silvery cloud cover, had only yet risen a short distance above the horizon.

Cosmo's usual post was operating a stone saw; he shared this job with Fob Discordia, the unofficial leader of the Twi'lek slaves. It didn't help the day go any faster that Discordia and Cosmo didn't really like each other. All Twi'leks struck humans as being sly and cunning, and Discordia had more than his fair share of those qualities. Still, neither of them had any choice in who they worked with, and so Cosmo and Discordia spent most of each day holding opposite ends of the same long diamond-toothed saw, working it back in forth to cut large blocks of marble into standard-sized pieces. Cosmo had no choice but to do the work with his arms; Discordia sometimes used the thick tentacles growing off the back of his head to do his share of the work. Although they weren't as strong as the Twi'leks arm, having no bones within them, he still managed to get the job done when using them.

The two of them were carving into their second block of the day when Leego, the quarry taskmaster appeared. Sometimes Cosmo wished he himself was a Bith or Kitonak or Kubaz — Bith eyes are solid black, so no one could tell where they were looking; the lensless Kitonak eyes are indistinguishable on their crumpled faces, and Kubaz eyes are shielded by their goggles. But being a human, anyone could tell what he was looking at — and Leego did not allow slaves to look upon him.

Still, whenever Leego was near, one had to be careful. Cosmo stole a glance at him. Leego was a Rodian, a slightly built green-skinned creature with bulging multifaceted bug eyes, short, cup-tipped antenna emerging from his warty forehead, a short snout with a small mouth at the end of it, external ear flaps that tapered to points, and a ridge of small spines running across the top of

the head.

About half of the staff were Rodians. Cosmo wasn't sure which ones in general he hated more — them, or the piglike Gamorreans. Both races were clients of the true Overlords, the seldom-seen Varlians, and each could be despised for different reasons: the Gamorreans for their brutish stupidity, foul tempers, and excessive love of wine; the Rodians for their cold, calculating hearts, their callousness, and their almost sexual attachment to their weapons.

But when speaking in specifics, rather than generalities, there was no doubt in Cosmo's mind of which of the slavers he loathed the most. Leego was without doubt the cruelest and most sadistic of the whole evil lot.

"You!" shouted Leego, in his strange, warbling voice. Cosmo tensed — and he could see everybody else around him doing the same thing. The last thing anyone wanted was to be singled out by Leego. "You — Twi'lek!" Cosmo was instantly relieved — and he hated himself for that. But at least it wasn't him that the taskmaster was after. "Twi'lek! Come here!"

Cosmo looked up. Leego was pointing with one of his long, tentacle-like suction-cup-tipped fingers at Fend Bellona, the slave who worked one of the chiseling stations removing protrusions from the stone bricks.

Bellona lifted his gaze. His headtails were wrapped around each other behind his head — a sure sign of agitation. "M — master?" he said.

"Come here!" repeated Leego.

Cosmo shook his head slightly — there was nothing worse than making Leego repeat an order.

Bellona walked forward, until he was perhaps four paces away from the Rodian.

"You have not been meeting your quota," said Leego, still shouting, making a show for all the other slaves.

"Your most excellent sir, please," said Bellona. He lifted his left arm, showing his hand. It had been badly mangled a dozen or so days ago when it had gotten caught between two large marble blocks. "I am doing my best, really I am."

"Your best," said Leego, unclipping a bullwhip from his belt, "is nowhere near good enough."

"But my hand, Lord! My hand!"

"Excuses do you no credit, Twi'lek. You could use those disgusting tentacles growing off your head."

"I can't hold a chisel with a tentacle, Master. It —"

"Silence!" snapped Leego. He cracked the whip down on the Twi'lek's shoulder. Bellona gasped.

Discordia and Cosmo kept pulling their saw back and forth. When he was younger, Cosmo had once intervened in one of Leego's cruel displays, but he'd learned after a severe beating that there was nothing he could do. There was no way to fight Leego on his own terms.

The whip cracked again. This time it dug into one of Bellona's headtails. Bellona made the *chuffing* sound that was his species' scream.

Cosmo tasted bile in his throat. If he had a chance — any chance at all — he would have lunged at Leego. But up on the quarry's rim, five Rodians with pulse rifles walked back and forth. They'd pick him off in an instant.

Another crack of the whip, the sound of its impact echoing off the hard quarry walls. Again and again Leego lashed the poor crippled Twi'lek.

Cosmo stopped sawing. Discordia looked at him, and whispered under his breath, "Don't."

"He should be stopped," said Cosmo through clenched teeth.

Another snapping of leather.

"Attack a guard and you're dead," whispered Discordia.

"But —"

"There!" shouted Leego. "That should teach you!" Cosmo looked around. Bellona was lying in a heap on the rocky quarry floor, long crisscrossing tracks of blood across both shoulders and both headtails.

Leego brought his whip to the end of his short snout, and Cosmo felt his stomach turn as the thing's prickly pink tongue cleaned the blood off the leather. The Rodian continued to lick the whip as he headed back to beneath the roofed porch from which he normally supervised the workers.

While his back was to them, Cosmo moved over to Bellona and helped him to his feet. The Twi'lek was whimpering. "He knew about my hand," said Bellona.

Cosmo nodded. He wanted to offer comforting words, but none came to him. He helped Bellona back to his station.

"He knew ..." said Bellona again. "I couldn't help it."

Cosmo looked up. Discordia's headtails were moving in a complex dance — tailtalk, the silent Twi'lek language. Cosmo had picked it up over his years on the joint human-Twi'lek quarry crew. *Come back*, Discordia was saying. *We can't let ourselves fall behind schedule.*

Cosmo normally would have touched Bellona's shoulder as a sign of support, but there was no spot that was free of welts. He left him and returned to Discordia. The two of them began working their saw back and forth, cutting into the marble the way Cosmo wished to carve into Leego's green hide ...

Almost all the slaves were working, directly or indirectly, on the building of a vast temple. Its construction had begun shortly after Kaxa came to power, and many had speculated that the temple was to be Kaxa's eventual tomb. Although the slaves looked forward to his death, the temple itself seemed to be an impossible, never-ending project.

It measured a thousand paces at its base, and already rose close to that distance into the sky.

The number of marble blocks used so far in its construction was beyond counting, and although no slave had ever seen plans of what the finished monument was supposed to look like, it seemed nowhere near being complete yet. Indeed, so far, it was little more than a huge, partially finished cube. Stone blocks were carved in the quarry, hauled on tree-trunk rollers the five thousand paces to the temple's base by Kitonaks — the only slaves powerful enough to do the work — then lifted by pulleys up to the top of the monument, where they were set in place. It was endless, mindless, back-breaking, repetitive work ... and Cosmo hated every minute of it.

Noon came, the blue light of Forhilnor's sun pounding through the clouds from directly overhead. A team of mousy Sullust slaves came by, dispensing a ladleful of water to each worker. Fob Discordia got his first, then it was Cosmo's turn. Cosmo felt a lot of marble grit going down his throat as he swallowed the warm liquid; the stone dust had built up on his face and inside his mouth during the course of the morning's cutting. But the slave masters were too niggardly with water to waste it on merely rinsing out one's mouth. Still, as it moved down his parched throat, Cosmo cursed it. Water wasn't difficult to come by; Forhilnor's ever-cloudy sky gave up rain often enough, and Cosmo's slave tasks had occasionally taken him near the reservoir, a vast manufactured lake next to the Governor's palace absolutely filled with water. No, portioning it out in such small doses was simply another cruelty, another indignity. Little surprise, thought Cosmo, that it always tasted bitter ...

As the Sullust who gave him the water continued on to the next slave, Cosmo saw that the little gray alien had crusted-over lash marks on his back, too. Leego had his sport often ...

"You!"

Converse of the demon — it was Leego's warbling voice. Heart pounding, Cosmo turned around and came face to snout with the bug-eyed taskmaster. Discordia and Cosmo both froze, not knowing which of them the taskmaster had come for. The Twi'lek's headtails danced in agitation.

Leego's voice again. "Come with me, Hender."

Hender. Even worse — Leego was calling him by name; he hadn't just picked a slave at random. Could it be that they'd discovered the body of the Gamorrean Cosmo had killed? They'd execute him for sure for that, but only after slow torture ...

"Come, I said!" snapped Leego, the suction cups at the ends of his long fingers making little popping sounds as he worked them up and down the haft of his bullwhip.

Cosmo began to move. "Yes, Master," he said through clenched teeth.

"You're a strong one," said Leego. "Stronger than most of the other humans." *Strong enough*, thought Cosmo, *to kill a Gamorrean*. "It will be a shame to lose you."

His life was over — there could be no doubt. Would the guards have the decency to tell Sallee that he'd been executed? Or would she simply have to figure it out for herself, when one of the other humans told her that he'd been called away from his station in the quarry. God, how he'd miss her — and their unborn child. He'd been so looking forward to being a father. Sallee had lost a child last year — all too common amongst the slaves, although the loss had still moved Cosmo to tears. But that tragedy had occurred only halfway through the pregnancy; Sallee was now just tens of days shy of delivery. To die having helped the cause of the slaves was acceptable. But why

couldn't it have been a few short days later? Why did it have to be before he'd at least set eyes on his child?

"Word came from the Governor's palace this morning," said Leego. "They asked for the strongest and brightest slave. I told them all slaves were surpassingly stupid — not to mention ugly — but that you at least were adaptable, in a crude sort of way."

Cosmo felt relief wash over him — this had nothing to do with the dead Gamorrean. He continued to walk, standing a few paces to Leego's left. "I almost disqualified you from consideration," said Leego, his short snout bobbing as he spoke. "That unfortunate incident of several years ago, when you dared challenge my absolute authority over your miserable lives. Yes, human — I still remember. But I took the fact that the punishment didn't have to be repeated as a sign that you had at least half a brain." He simultaneously released all the suction cups from the haft of his whip, making a sound like the kiss of death.

It was hot and humid. The sun was a blue smear behind the clouds. Dola-flies buzzed about; Cosmo swatted at them from time to time, although Leego, like all Rodians, seemed immune to their biting — the flies found the Rodians unpalatable fare for some reason.

"What, if I may ask, is required of me, Master?" said Cosmo. Rodians were notoriously bad at detecting the subtleties of human vocal tones, so Cosmo allowed himself the luxury of a sneer.

"You'll find out soon enough," said Leego. "But now it's off to the palace with you." The Rodian looked around. "You, there! Rees Raf! Come here!" A particularly dull-looking Gamorrean shambled over to join them. "Take this human to Governor Kaxa's palace. Tell the guards there he's for Delba."

Delba was a name Cosmo had heard before, but he couldn't quite place it. Someone very important, though — and clearly one of the Overlords, rather than a Gamorrean or Rodian, judging by the final "-a" sound of the name.

Rees Raf grunted, and drew his short sword. The clouds were thick enough to keep the metal from glinting, but Cosmo had no doubt that the blade was sharp — when not cutting blocks for the temple, Cosmo and Discordia sometimes were ordered to find and polish whetstones for the Gamorreans. "Let's go," said Rees Raf.

But Cosmo risked one more question. "When will I be back, Master?"

Leego wiggled his elongated fingers. "You aren't coming back, human."

Cosmo felt his stomach knotting. "But I have a mate — a mate who is with child!"

"You have nothing, slave."

"But surely I will be sent back to the human compound to sleep?"

Leego's multifaceted eyes looked at him, and, a moment later, the Rodian's two short antenna swung to face him, as well. "I doubt it, human. Palace slaves are usually kept separate from the rest of the workforce."

"But my mate!"

Leego touched the suction cups on his left hand to the cups on his right — an obscene Rodian

gesture. "I'm sure she'll find someone else to warm her bed."

Rees Raf gestured at Cosmo with his sword. "Let's go."

Cosmo's head was spinning. Yes, he was to live — but to live without Sallee! He thought about running, about trying to get away. He could lose himself for days on end amongst over a hundred thousand other humans. But when they did finally find him, they would doubtless mete out punishment not just to him, but to Sallee and their child as well. He began to walk again.

Rees Raf was slobbering — Gamorreans relied heavily on the digestive power of their saliva, and began to drool long before each meal. The palace was a good three thousand paces from the quarry — a distance designed to shield it both from noise and the clouds of dust. Cosmo wondered briefly if they'd have to walk it, or whether one of the land speeders — sleek ground-effect vehicles, rarely seen this close to the slave encampment — would be used to convey them there.

But Gamorreans were also famous for their flatulence — they were ruminants; when they were slobbering in anticipation of their next meal, they were chewing a cud left over from the last, and often expelling gas from both ends of their digestive tract. Cosmo didn't know much about spaceflight, but he'd heard stories of the mysterious "zero gravity" and had wondered if a Gamorrean would be set to pinwheeling under such conditions. In any event, even Gamorreans found the smell of their own intestinal gas offensive; they were great walkers, given to keeping ahead of the trail they left behind. And so it seemed, despite the noontime heat, that Cosmo and Rees Raf were in for a bit of a hike.

They'd gotten no farther than a few hundred paces when Cosmo caught sight of Dant, the scrawny, nervous youth who occupied the bunk above Cosmo and Sallee. Cosmo stole a glance back at Rees Raf. The Gamorrean was still holding his short sword, and had a carbine blaster dangling from his wide belt. Weapons of death only — no stunner. Cosmo gambled that Rees Raf would not risk Leego's wrath for killing him for a minor infraction. He ran ahead. "Dant! Dant!"

The young man looked up, pale gray eyes peering out of a gaunt hyperthyroid face. But seeing the Gamorrean lumbering to catch up with Cosmo, he dared not speak.

"Dant — get word to Sallee. I've been reassigned to the palace. I don't know for how long. But tell her I'm safe! Tell her I love her."

"Silence!" shouted Rees Raf, raising his sword high. "Silence!"

Dant lowered his eyes, terrified.

"Tell her, Dant! Tell her!"

"I said shut up!" Spit flew from Rees Raf's wide, tusked mouth. "Shut up!"

"Will you tell her, Dant?" Cosmo's voice had taken on a note of desperation.

Dant nodded, almost imperceptibly. Cosmo breathed a sigh of relief. The lank human scuttled away. Cosmo turned to face Rees Raf, hands lifted. "I'm sorry."

The Gamorrean belched, and poked the sword in Cosmo's direction. "Pick up the pace, human. We can't keep Lady Delba waiting."

They continued walking. The ground here in the quarry was mostly barren beige rock, a few twisted green-and-purple weeds keeping a tenuous hold on life in small clefts. When they reached the quarry wall, instead of taking the rickety wooden stairs that he normally used, Rees Raf gestured him into the open-cage elevator, used by the guards to enter and exit the pit. Cosmo had often wondered what it would be like to ride in the thing; now he was going to find out. He entered, and the Gamorrean came in after him. There was a single large button on the side of the cage. The guard punched it with the end of his sword's hilt, and the cage shuddered into movement. Cosmo watched in fascination and no small measure of fear as the ground receded below him. He could see thousands of humans and Twi'leks working near by, and, farther along, a team of brawny Kitonaks hauling a giant block of stone. There were other figures in the distance. In most cases, it was impossible to tell whether they were Biths or Kubazi — they were too tall for Sullusts, at least. He had no trouble picking out Ortolans by their blue color, and Mon Calamaris by their red. And Ithorians, with their hammerheads and odd, twisted bodies, were distinctive over even a great distance.

So many slaves, though Cosmo. So much misery, so much toil.

He felt anger growing within him. This elevator — how much easier the slaves lives would be if they were allowed to use it to haul stone blocks out of the quarry, instead of having to raise them by back-breaking effort with block and tackle.

He looked at Rees Raf — fat, disgusting, with oily green skin and yellowed tusks and horns. The thing got more food than he knew what to do with. It was all so unfair, so cruel, so ...

The elevator jerked to a halt at the top of the quarry. This time, the other side opened up, and Cosmo and Rees Raf exited. A group of perhaps two hundred Kubazi were visible, their eyes shielded by goggles, the fronts of their stiff flat-tipped trunks showing signs of sunburn. They were valiantly trying to move several large tree trunks that were to be used as rollers.

Beyond them, a group of perhaps fifty Biths were using chisels to carve over and over again a string of symbols said to represent Governor Kaxa's name into slabs of blue-veined marble.

Endless activity.

From here, they could clearly see the temple off in one direction, its bulk casting a shadow over the workers. God alone knew when it would be finished. Finally, a positive aspect to his new assignment occurred to Cosmo — it was said that the temple was not visible from the palace; intervening stands of native trees, and a row of hillocks blocked the view. If the temple was to be Kaxa's tomb, this made sense — no one would want to be reminded constantly of the inevitability of his eventual demise.

Rees Raf poked his sword in Cosmo's direction again, and Cosmo began to walk. He had never been to the palace, nor did he know any slave who had ever visited it. He had no idea what to expect.

Suddenly, there was a roaring sound from high over head. Cosmo and even dull Rees Raf tipped their head up to look. Seven small spaceships had broken through the cloud cover, and were heading for the Governor's landing field, just beyond the palace. The ships were flying in a V-formation. Cosmo had seen more and more of such exercises lately. The governor was clearly preparing his fleet for something ... but what that something was, Cosmo had no idea.

The ships overshot the landing field — apparently deliberately — turned around as if piloted by a single person, and came in for a touchdown on the long gray runway, which stretched out toward the horizon. It was a beautiful maneuver, flawlessly executed, at least to Cosmo's untrained eye.

Rees Raf lifted his sword to prod Cosmo into movement again, but after standing downwind of the Gamorrean for several moments, he needed no encouragement to resume walking.

As they continued on, the palace slowly rose into view. It was the very definition of opulent for Cosmo — the only building he'd ever seen in his whole life that wasn't functional, spartan, harsh, and bare.

The palace itself was surrounded by what looked like fence posts, one every twenty paces or so. But connecting each of these posts were force-field curtains keyed to the life energies of the various races that inhabited Forhilnor. A Gamorrean or Rodian or an overlord could pass through unharmed; a Bith, Kitonak, Kubaz, Twi'lek, Mon Calamari, human, Ortolan, Sullust, or Ithorian would be killed instantly if he or she attempted to pass between any pair of post, unless wearing a palace-servant's armband. The system that allowed safe passage of the Overlords and their Rodian and Gamorrean clients was said to work flawlessly; the armband system apparently had bugs in it that no one had ever thought worth eradicating — every few months there would be stories of a slave assigned to the palace having been killed by the force field even though he or she wore the proper armband.

Inside the fence — appearing to shimmer slightly, because of the intervening force field — was the palace itself, a massive, ancient structure. It was hexagonal in outline, and had tapering hexagonal towers rising up from each of its six corners. The towers were surmounted with crystal domes. Four of them appeared to be different colors — red, yellow, green, blue. Two seemed to Cosmo to be the same shade of purple, but he'd overheard two Rodians talking once about the fact that the Overlords saw into the ultraviolet; to them the two probably appeared different colors.

The walls were elaborately carved, and inlaid in complex patterns with six-sided shields of gold and other precious metals. Along the upper edges of the great central hexagon, intricate insectoid gargoyles stared down at the ground below.

As they drew nearer, Cosmo saw two land speeders pull into the palace, swooping in from above the force curtain. They were just about to pass the point from which the temple the slaves were building ceased to be visible. Cosmo glanced back at it. It seemed so crude, so rough-hewn, in comparison to the elegance and artistry of the palace. A very peculiar sort of tomb for a person who had enjoyed such richness in life, thought Cosmo.

Finally, they reached the perimeter of the palace. Cosmo could hear a high-pitched hum coming from the force field. Just in front of the line of field fence posts, there was a small guardhouse, also hexagonal in shape. Rees Raf went over to it, and gestured for the Rodian within to come out. The Rodian was clad in what to Cosmo seemed pure black leather: a jacket, black shirt beneath, pants, and gleaming boots. But he had heard that palace uniforms, too, were richly patterned in colors only the Overlords could see.

"This one's been assigned to palace duty," said Rees Raf. He'd finally put his sword back in his scabbard, and was gesturing now at Cosmo with just a beefy green-gray hand.

The Rodian said something in reply that Cosmo didn't catch, returned to his guardhouse for a moment, then came out brandishing a small case. He gestured for Cosmo to come closer, opened the case, and removed a thick hypodermic needle from it, then stabbed it roughly into Cosmo's arm. The pain was sharp and hard to bear, but Cosmo kept his face impassive — he'd not give the bug-eyed alien any pleasure. The Rodian drew back the plunger, filling the glass syringe with blood.

"Humans," said the Rodian in a typically warbling Rodian voice. He shook his head. "They're the worst. Of all the slave races, humans are the only one that don't have DNA in their oxygen-carrying corpuscles. We have to take samples from their white cells instead."

Rees Raf looked completely uninterested in what the Rodian was saying. The guard with the plunger turned around and bent over his case. Cosmo saw him squirting his blood into some sort of equipment. The machine bleeped after a few moments, and the guard rose again, this time holding a C-shaped metal band.

"Extend your arm," said the Rodian. Cosmo did so. The band was affixed around his forearm, clamping shut into a complete circle.

"This band," said the Rodian, "will allow you to pass through the force field. It also identifies you as a member of the palace slave force. Never remove it. Nor can you lend it to anyone — it is keyed to your genetic material. All right — go through the force field now."

"But — but what if it doesn't work?" asked Cosmo, looking at the shimmering wall in front of him.

The Rodian shrugged. "If it doesn't work, I'm sure they'll find another slave to fulfill whatever duties they have in mind for you.

Cosmo walked forward. He hesitated just in front of the force field, but, above the electric whine, he could hear Rees Raf unsheathing his sword again. Cosmo stepped ahead. Walking through the field felt like having small insects crawling all over his body. He also felt the hair on the back of his neck standing up, and suspected that the rest of his hair might have done so, too, had it not been matted down with sweat from his morning's labors.

Rees Raf followed Cosmo through the curtain, and they headed in toward the entrance to the palace. It was a vast archway, in the shape of half a hexagon, behind which were two doors, ten paces high each. The doors opened of their own volition as they approached.

Inside, the corridors were rich marble — obviously kept clean and polished by slave labor, but still showing the signs of centuries of use. The lips of each step leading up into the main hallway, although still reasonably sharp right angles at the edges, were rounded and smooth in the center.

Cosmo saw dozens of Gamorreans and equal numbers of Rodians, but he noted with interest that the two races seemed to rarely mingle, and when they passed others going in the opposite direction, Gamorreans would only greet Gamorreans, just as Rodians would only hail others of their own species.

Finally, they came to an opulent antechamber, which was empty. Rees Raf walked ahead of Cosmo, dipped his blockish head, and hit the small gong adjacent to another intricately carved door.

"Gamorrean Guard Rees Raf to see her excellency, Lady Delba," he announced.

The door opened, Rees Raf walked in, and he beckoned with a beefy hand for Cosmo to follow. "I bring the slave you requested, most exalted one." He bowed as much as his massive belly would allow.

Cosmo stepped in, and, for the first time in his life, he beheld one of the Overlords close up.

And that's all of the novel I wrote, but here's the outline for the whole novel.

More Good Reading

The outline for this novel, *Alien Exodus*

The opening chapters of Rob's *Star Trek* novel *Armada*

Science fiction trivia quiz by Robert J. Sawyer

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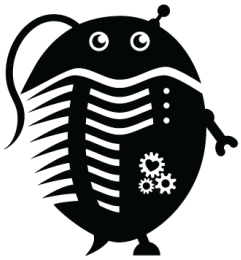

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